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COVER: An intergalactic vessel scoops needed energy from the heart of a raging sun. Art by David Mattingly. ABOVE: Warf (Michael Darn) must save the day in Star Trek: First Contact. *See details on page 30.*

FICTION

40 BLIND EYE
By Jack Dann

The Visitors came from the future to make him pay for the past.

45 SAM AND THE PRUDENT JURIST
By Ben Bova

Sam Gunn was a space rascal and an intergalactic gambling man. But a murderer? That was what the Interplanetary Tribunal was sworn to find out.

66 THE FIVE BIOGRAPHIES OF GENERAL GERRHAN
By Don Webb

It is said that in war, the first casualty is the truth. Unfortunately, Thomas Lasser found out that the second casualty was... Thomas Lasser

72 BLOOMING ICE
By Robert Reed

On a frozen alien world. three Earthers try to find a new home. Beneath the ice, however, lies something that may not let them.

78 THE CHILDREN'S FUND TO SAVE THE DINOSAURS: A CHARITY APPEAL
By Thomas M. Disch

On a frozen alien world. three Earthers try to find a new home. Beneath the ice, however, lies something that may not let them.

86 THE JACKDAW'S LAST CASE
By Paul Di Filippo

Franz Kafka awoke one morning from an uneasy sleep to discover that he had been transformed into a mild-mannered reporter for a great metropolitan newspaper.

DEPARTMENTS

8 EDITORIAL
It's time for to place your vote on your favorite fiction of 1996.

12 LETTERS
Readers write on Martian life and the science in the Science Forum.

14 BOOKS *BY MARK W. TIEDEMANN, PAUL DI FILIPPO AND RICHARD PARKS*
Baxter takes us to Mars, Brin continues to Uplift, and Barton brings his conscience to outer space.

24 ALTERNATIVE MEDIA
Hot tips on the best new SF comics, collectibles, Internet sites and more.

30 MOVIES *BY MELISSA PERENSON*
The crew of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* takes on the Borg in their big screen solo debut.

36 SCIENCE *BY STEPHEN BAXTER AND GREGORY BENFORD*
There may be life on Mars. So what are we going to do about it?

80 GALLERY *BY ALAN DEAN FOSTER*
Barclay Shaw's imagination contains the art of the unexpected.

96 GAMES *BY CONNIE HIRSCH*
X-Files fans will be glad to learn that the truth (and the game) is out there.

106 CONTRIBUTORS

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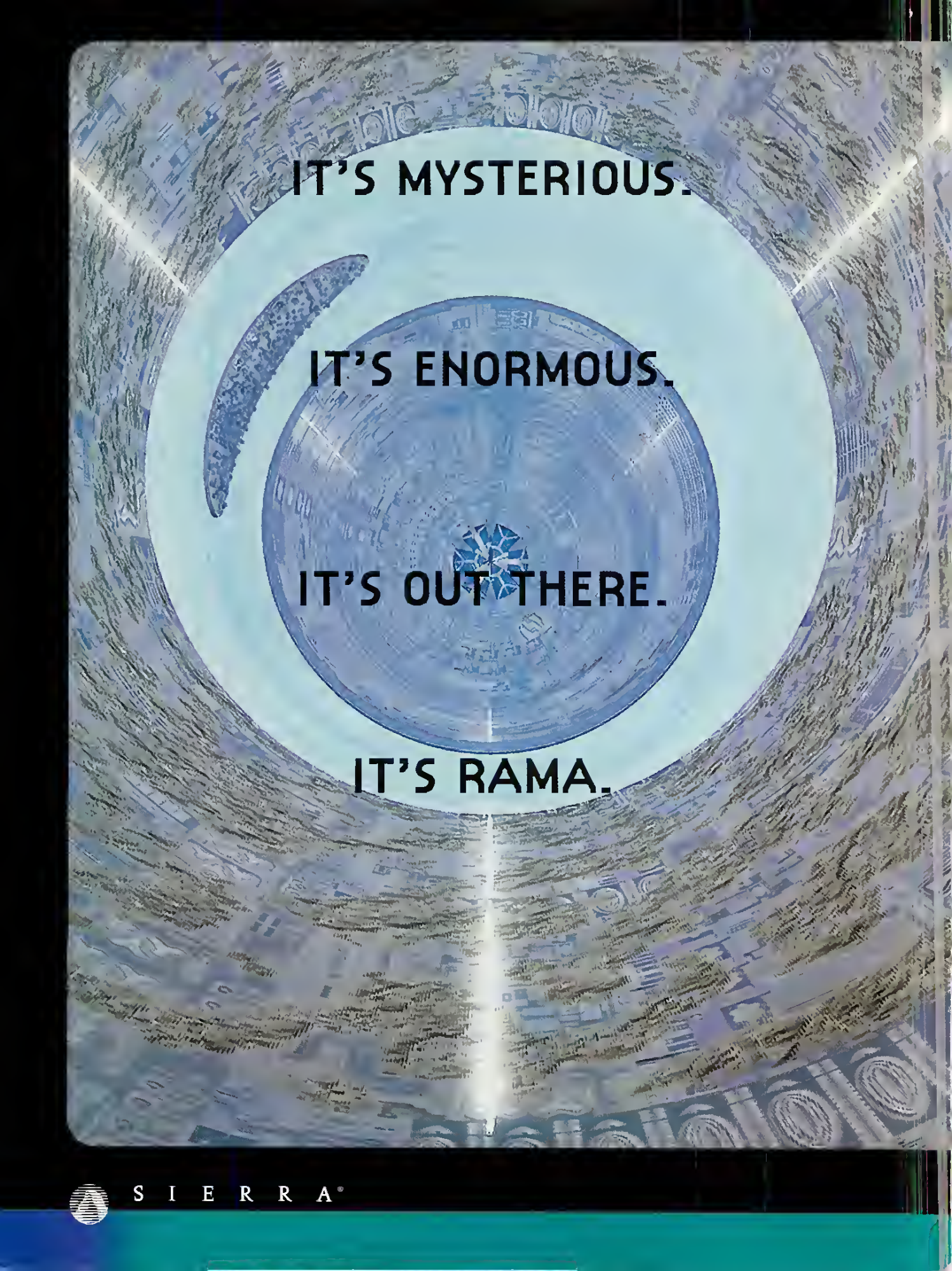
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KIDS TO ADULTS
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Take a moment to let us know who wrote the best SF tales of 1996.

LAST YEAR WAS THE FIRST IN WHICH we polled you on your favorite stories of the year. The reaction was so strong that we thought we'd better do it again. Many of our readers are active in the science fiction field as fans (and as professional writers and editors as well), and would like this information to help them cast votes for the annual Hugo and Nebula awards, which require such categorizations.

A short story (as defined by the rules-makers) is any piece of fiction up to 7,500 words, a novelette is considered a story over 7,500 words but under 17,500 words, and novellas are those longer works which are greater than 17,500 words but are not as long as a novel.

In the interests of helping our readers who take part in such awards events, we offer the following list.

But we don't want you to stop there.

We don't want you speaking only to awards committees. We also want you to help us make the magazine better by telling us which of our stories were the best of the year. We're at the beginning of our fifth year of publication, a good time to take stock of the year gone by, and make plans for an even better tomorrow..

Using the list below, go back and refresh your memory as to which story you enjoyed the most in each category. Then simply write the names of your favorites—two each for novella, novelette, and short story—on a postcard and send it to me at *Science Fiction Age* Readers' Poll, 441 Carlisle Drive, Herndon VA 22070.

Results will he announced in a future issue.

NOVELLAS

- "Immersion" by Gregory Benford (March)
- "Saddle Point Dreamtime" hy Stephen Baxter (Novemher)
- "The Saddle Point Sequence" hy Stephen Baxter (July)
- "The Tree that Grew from the Sky" by Robert Silverberg (September)

NOVELETTES

- "The Compassionate Smothering-Death of the Universe" by Kandis Elliot (May)
- "Farthest Horizons" hy Geoffrey A. Landis (May)
- "Kronos" by Allen Steele (January)
- "On the Golcondar Run" hy Daniel Hood (May)
- "The Politics of Pneumatic Times" by Eric T. Baker (January)
- "Seven Postcards from the Highway and Not a Jackalope Among Them" by Alexander Jablokov (September)

SHORT STORIES

- "The Alzheimer Laureate" by Michael Bishop (March)
- "The Beauty Monster" by Mark Rich (September)
- "Brain Artist: A Romance" by Charles M. Saplak (March)
- "The Bride of Elvis" by Kathleen Ann Goonan (May)
- "A Chicago Dinner Party, Sometime After" by W. Gregory Stewart (November)
- "Colnmbiad" by Stephen Baxter (May)
- "The Day the Magic Came Back" by James Gunn (January)
- "The Death of a Star" by Jack Williamson (July)
- "The Face of God" by David Ira Cleary (September)
- "Ferryman" by Ian Watson (March)
- "Fire Born" by Storm Constantine (November).
- "Fortitude" by David Brin (January)
- "From a Stone" by Eric Choi (September)
- "Headlines" by Jane Yolen (May)
- "Just a Couple of Pastrami Sandwiches in a Living Room the Size of Infinity" by Adam-Troy Castro (July)
- "The Lady Vanishes" by Charles Sheffield (November)
- "Life Edit" by Damon Knight (September)
- "Out of Bondage" by Don Webb (January)
- "The Procedure" by Michael Bishop (July)
- "Redux" by Julie Stevens (March)
- "The Silver Shoes" by Resa Nelson (March)
- "A Song Against the Dark" by Mary Turzillo (January)
- "Strings" by Maureen F. McHugh (November)
- "334 Manchester Lane" by Robert Reed (July)
- "Tourist Trade" by Stephen Dedman (September)
- "Virtual Kaballah" by Phillip C. Jennings (July)

To encourage reader participation, after the votes are counted, we will pull three readers' names at random out of the mailbag and send them each a selection of recent assorted books and prepublication galleys.

Please respond by February 1, 1997 so that we can fill you in on the results in our May 1997 issue. □

Scott Edelman

SCIENCE FICTION AGE

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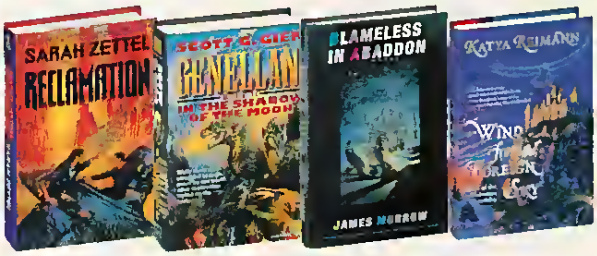


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Mr. Edelman:

I'm sorry I'm too late to cast a vote for best of '95. "The Androgyne Murders" by Kandis Elliot (November '95) was very thought-provoking. Thinking about the questions raised, the ramifications of the society, etc., went days to weeks beyond the reading.

I am writing this letter however, because there are maybe 3-5 books I have read in my lifetime with scenes so poignant, losses so great, that I am reduced to tears mid-paragraph.

Such is the case with Mary A. Turzillo's "A Song Against the Dark" in the January 1996 issue. The story of little Temu, so energetic and desirous of higher learning, one hopes for a happy ending where 'she' is the next step in her kind's evolution. Or on changing to a male, that 'he' would retain cognitive awareness. But it is not to be, and in a rather climactic fashion. Thank you Ms. Turzillo.

Steve Field

Dear Editor:

I write in response to your Science Forum article in the September 1996 issue. Again, I am tired of the whining by the scientists of science fiction. While science is important to science fiction, it should not forever be the mainstay of the field. Many excellent stories and novels exist today with many science blunders in them. If these science fiction purists would have their way, every science fiction novel would be a science text.

Give me some story-telling, give me some action instead of endless pages of science mumbo jumbo. Question: Why do *Battletech* and *Star Trek* novels sell so well? I go to the bookstores. I know which books have more shelf space. Just an observation.

Paul E. Bird

Dear Mr. Editor:

I must say that *Science Fiction Age* is the most engrossing and lavishly designed magazine I have ever read! I love the way you load it with great SF stories, letter pages, movie and book reviews — and the panel on SF technology was excellent! Furthermore, it is not filled with ads, and the ads it does have are useful and informative.

I immensely enjoyed the science panel, and I believe it to be the highlight of the magazine. The way it was written is unique and entertaining. You don't get struck on one person droning on over the same topic for five pages. I have some feedback regarding Ms. Asaro and Mr. Landis' discussion on SF tech.

First of all, when they discussed Faster Than Light travel SF, they said that most SF doesn't account for time travel during FTL travel. However, I am an avid Star Trek fan, and if you read Michael Okuda's *Star Trek Encyclopedia* you will find that Warp Drive is consistent with all the problems they discussed.

Second, I totally agree with them on nanotechnology. Kudos. Third, they said that "SF energy does not waste heat." However, again, referring to *Star Trek*, starships vent a waste material known as "plasma" which is a very hot gaseous material.

Fourth they said that half the *Star Trek* characters would not exist because under independent evolution it is unlikely that most of the species in *Star Trek* would evolve into humanoid form. Then they justified it with the *ST* episode "The Chase." Which I thought clearly explained all the different humanoids and interbreeding capabilities.

Fifth, they said, "when spaceships accelerate from some tiny speed to FTL speed the whole crew should be plastered to the wall." Again, I must refer to *Star Trek*. In *ST* there is a device on spaceships called *inertial dampening* which in Michael Okuda's *Star Trek Encyclopedia* reads: "Field manipulation devices assigned to compensate for the acceleration forces generated when a space vehicle changed speed." In closing, I would like to thank all the people involved in creating such an excellent magazine. Thanks.

Brett A. Encelewski

Dear Editor:

The letter by Ronald D. Thurman (September 1996) read like a manifesto that would have been more appropriate for inclusion to *High Times* magazine, not *Science Fiction Age*. Mr. Thurman provides us with a number of "facts" concerning cannabis hemp without providing the reader with any supporting evidence. I believe most of us readers have been aware of similar claims to those made by Mr. Thurman over the course of the last decade or so, but I know of no well-informed persons who would agree with the majority of Mr. Thurman's statements.

I would like to suggest leaving behind the propaganda of the 1970s and '80s so as to discuss current issues that are much weightier than the legalization of cannabis. Perhaps, *Science Fiction Age* could focus more on science fiction and science fact rather than printing one individual's political agenda.

Barton E. Hill

Dear *Science Fiction Age*:

In your September 1996 Science Forum, you quiz the science SF wonks Asaro and Landis about the unreality of some parts of the genre. I found this a little ridiculous and a little offensive. I would like to impolitically point out that the theories put forth by mainline scientists have included such concepts as a flat Earth. The forward arm of mainline science, the "just around the corner" boys, have sometimes been very, very deluded and misleading. And they have been pontificating from within the shell of officialdom which carries "credence" and "weight." I wouldn't stop them for the world, but don't try to tell me they are not absurd at times. Please!

From the Earth to the Moon! What mainline scientist of the time worth his salt would have said it was possible when Jules Verne floated this idea broadly in our culture? I don't say the idea was original with him, but this man led science to discover the practical application by putting it boldly in view. It was the power of the idea that took us there! No rockets were ever as powerful.

I find it disagreeable for "scientists" to critique the SF genre, even if they have written in it. Let me give you an idea of what I mean from the article itself. They discuss Faster–than–light travel and time. Landis says something about future and past "light cones." What is the bet that when FTL drive is in use here on Earth, the theory espoused here is just bunk and the real application is something inspired by an SF writer!

Peter Arthur

Dear Scott:

Science Fiction Age is great, and gets better with every issue. But I was really, really disappointed with your November 1996 editorial about "Life on Mars." The fossils presented were *not* conclusive proof of life on Mars. They resembled deposits left by organic activity, but we cannot be certain that they actually are. Those presenting the findings were careful to describe them as inconclusive, but the news media quickly exploded the story into one of untrue and unrealistic proportions. In reading them (e.g., *Newsweek*'s cover screamed "Life on Mars"), I thought, "Well, at least *SF Age* will view this realistically." Apparently, I was wrong in assuming your objectivity.

Mark Biery

Hope springs eternal in this SF editor's heart. While the editorial was written in the heat of the first few days following announcement, I hope that this issue's Science Forum on the subject provides what you will think is a more balanced approach.

Readers—please let us know how we're doing at: Letters to the Editor, Science Fiction Age, *P. O. Box 369, Damascus, MD 20872, or e-mail to S.Edelman1@Genie.Geis.Com. or use CompuServe address: 102746,2004.*



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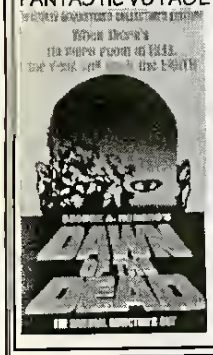
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By Mark W. Tiedemann, Richard Parks and Paul Di Filippo

On an Earth that never was, Stephen Baxter explores a Mars that still could be.



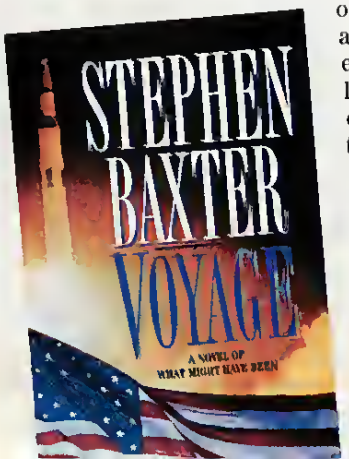
ABOVE: David Brin's new Uplift trilogy continues in book two, Infinity's Shore. *Art by Jim Burns. BELOW: Stephen Baxter's alternate NASA takes us ta new worlds.*

ALTERNATE HISTORIES ARE ABOUT WHAT MIGHT have been given certain key changes in what was. Unlike traditional SF that lays out future possibilities cafeteria-style, such novels trace paths not taken, a kind of speculative archaeology of worlds that look a lot like ours — but aren't.

Usually the changes are dramatic: England under Elizabeth I losing to Spain or the South winning the Civil War. Chance dictates a different course — Booth misses Lincoln and kills Mary Todd — and subsequent history deviates. The question underlying such speculation is always, how much would things have changed? In most cases, though, we are given scenarios that rely on big factors shifting history onto the new road, often accepting as given the "Great Person" theory of history, that individuals stand at the major crossroads and their presence or absence affects everything.

A subtler approach, and perhaps much more rewarding, is what Stephen Baxter gives us in *Voyage* (Harper Prism, hardcover, 528 pages, $23.00) — a road not taken simply because another one was.

In the aftermath of Apollo, NASA looks around for a new goal, something to set its sights on for the next generation of development and achievement. The country has a new president, war is being waged in Southeast Asia, and the space agency is faced with cuts, some of which have already begun, cuts inevitable, as one character points out, because the funding for NASA is largely discretionary — it *can* be cut. The director of NASA, Thomas Paine, proves himself to be a visionary lacking political savvy, and a new head of the agency must be found. Fred Michaels steps into Paine's place and sets the tone for the next decade — NASA is going to Mars. With the twin allies in the White House of Vice President Spiro Agnew and Deputy Director of Office Management and Budget Caspar Weinberger, Michaels sells the project and the novel proceeds as a richly-detailed chronicle of the process of getting people to the red planet.



Baxter's achievement is that he uses "off the shelf" material, as it were. This is essentially the way it would have happened, apart from the fictional drama. He shows us clearly, with precision and energy, how NASA worked, how the space program functioned, what was involved in reaching goals. In large part, this is what did happen, on other projects. While reading *Voyage* it is sometimes difficult to keep in mind that we didn't go this way.

Of the broad spectrum of well-realized characters, it is Natalie York, geologist-turned-astronaut, who shows us the agonizing workings of becoming an astronaut and dealing with the bureaucracy and the culture that grew up around NASA in the '60s. She is a dedicated scientist, and, like most scientists at the time, gloomily dissatisfied with the space program. It is, to her, all "flags and footprints," patriotic posturing at the expense of any real value, namely the science. She accepts the challenge proffered by her close friend and astronaut Ben Priest to join the team and show them where they're wrong. From application through acceptance through training, all the way to her first steps on Mars, Natalie is the outsider observing the way America's space program works, warts and all. Along the way, despite continued skepticism and unease with NASA's priorities and protocols, she becomes infected with The Dream.

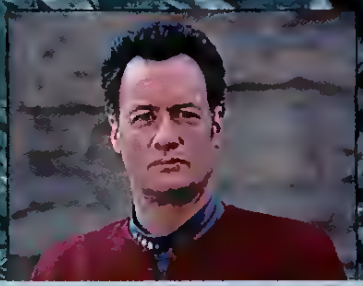
Baxter understands the interactions involved and, consistently, quietly, he reminds us throughout that it is a fight — The Dream against politics, The Dream against technology, The Dream against resources, The Dream against other dreams. He shows us how the deals are done, how the "larger goal" becomes eroded over time by more immediate, less lofty but nevertheless bitingly real concerns. He shows us the amalgam of trade-off and desire:

"Josephson was mildly shocked at how quickly the scientific and exploratory aspects of spaceflight were discarded as factors in shaping the new program. Nobody with any clout cared about going to Mars, or anywhere else, for the science."

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demonstrates, the costs are high. Lost careers, shattered lives, despair, death. At every turn the question must be asked "Is it worth it?"

The problem — the bugbear — for the space enthusiast has always been politics. The wizard of possibilities lays out a buffet of programs and asks which one we want to see. Of course, the answer is "All of them." And why not? It's only money, time, resources — things we clearly squander on other projects that seem to feed no dreams. But the wizard wags a finger and says "No, no, only one."

What we got instead of Mars was the shuttle, Viking, Voyager, Galileo, Magellan, a few more moon landings, the forthcoming space station — the road we did take. In the course of the novel, Baxter's people occasionally think about those trade-offs, the fact that in their timeline they did not send Voyager to the outer planets or chase comets. Baxter's alternate history takes off from our own when John Kennedy is not killed in Dallas — Jackie is, JFK is only crippled — and so becomes a powerful cheerleader keeping the pressure on subsequent administrations. In Baxter's 1976, it is Ted Kennedy instead of the loudly anti-space Mondale who runs with Jimmy Carter, so the champions remain, a direct connection from 1961 all the way to Reagan. But it becomes clear in the course of *Voyage* that it would not really have mattered. We considered Mars, in 1970, and simply chose another road. It is a truer picture of history, the way forces that have virtually nothing to do with personality work to shape our times, and Baxter's history is therefore just as legitimate as our own.

Science and engineering are comprised of myriad details, each one dull and arcane to the uninitiated. It is very easy to become discouraged by the mountain of such details, most of which seem to say that something we dearly wish to do is not doable. It is easier still to forget that, when it turns out The Dream is doable, that science and engineering are only the means. The details cannot match and certainly cannot replace The Dream as the reason to go. But dreams are damnably difficult to express to a budget committee. Baxter dramatizes even this and gives us a chance to see how we get lost.

But Baxter never loses touch and brings us through the long struggle to stand on a field and watch The Dream rise, an arrow on a shaft of light and thunder, and grab at our imagination, as when we were children and first realized that the stars and planets were places, and that it might be possible to go to them.

Mark W. Tiedemann

***Infinity's Shore**, by David Brin, Bantam Books, $23.95, 523pp, hardcover.*

There are problems in reviewing the middle book of a trilogy, and even more so when much of the story has been unfolding in books prior to the "first." There's no way to judge the story arc since it's not complete. All you can really comment on is the part of the story in front of you. The other problem arises from the first, in that it's difficult to provide any context *without* going elsewhere in the series, so pardon the recap.

For those new to the series, in David Brin's *Uplift* universe all sapient species except the long-vanished "Progenitors" are believed to be the result of *uplift*, the genetic manipulation of pre-sapient species to sentience by a Patron race. By Galactic law, the so-called "client" race is bound to their Patron for a period of indentured servitude. Naturally the creation of successful client races is a source of great wealth and pride to their Patrons. Enter the upstart human race, who apparently has achieved sapience all on its own, though an alien-worshipping human cult called the "Daniks" (named after guess who) believe otherwise. Three hundred years after First Contact, the Earthclan has few allies and is still barely tolerated.

Earlier in the series the mixed human and neo-dolphin crew of the Earthclan ship *Streaker* accidentally uncovers an extraordinary find: an intact Progenitor fleet, from which they recover the actual mummified remains of what is believed to be the earliest sapient race, easily a billion years old. They attempt to hand over the find to the proper authorities, only to see the fragile galactic rule of law break down. Soon *Streaker* is being pursued by the most powerful races in the galaxy, determined to take the prize for themselves.

Infinity's Shore picks up where *Brightness Reef* left off. The surviving human and neo-dolphin crew of the Earthclan ship *Streaker* have fled to the abandoned planet Jijo, only to discover (1) it isn't abandoned and (2) some of the nastier pursuers of *Streaker* — thought shaken off in their desperate flight through the carbon debris of a giant star — is still close on their trail.

The first revelation seems to be the greater mystery. For illegal "sooner" settlers to take over a fallow world for any length of time without detection in the first place is almost unheard-of. There are clearly special circumstances surrounding the Jijoans' success that are, at the very least, suspicious. Even some of the settlers themselves are beginning to wonder. Moreover, six supposedly antagonistic races — Humans, Traeki, Qheuens, Urs, g'Kek, and Hoons — are sharing Jijo in rela-

Books To Watch For

Schismatrix Plus, by Bruce Sterling (Ace) The far future *Schismatrix* universe is a tumultuous one, wherein Shaper revolutionaries battle against the aristocratic Mechanists for control of mankind's destiny. The volume contains a complete novel and numerous short stories — every word Sterling has written in this milieu so far.

Killdozer! The Complete Short Stories of Theodore Sturgeon, Volume 3, by Theodore Sturgeon (North Atlantic Books). Continue re-living the magic of the spiritual father of humanist SF with another collection of classic tales, including the suspenseful thriller of the title.

Earthly Pleasures, by Reed Manning (Circlet Press). Working under this pseudonym, this Nebula-nominated writer puts forward his special brand of sexy science fiction, definitely for adults only. Jack C. Haldeman II provides an introduction on science fiction erotica.

Space Opera, edited by Anne McCaffrey and Elizabeth Ann Scarborough (DAW). The punning title might have you gearing up for cosmic laser battles, but the opera turns out to be a more literal one. Alan Dean Foster, Peter S. Beagle, Gene Wolfe and others present twenty musical SF tales.



Quicker Than the Eye by Ray Bradbury (Avon). A new collection by the magical master is always a cause for celebration. 21 newly gathered tales form his first major work in 8 years.

The Faces of Fantasy, by Patti Perret (Tor). Writers are a funny lot, hiding behind typewriters and word processors. Some of them have stepped clear to bare their faces (and souls). Included are such writers as L. Sprague de Camp, Lisa Goldstein, Ursula K. LeGuin and 100 others. With an introduction by Terri Windling.

At the City Limits of Fate, by Michael Bishop (Edgewood Press). Containing his finest tales of the past decade, Bishop's latest short story collection is a delight. Twenty-one stories are included by this master of characterization, all of them worthy of this second life.

The Exploded Heart, by John Shirley (Eyeball Books). Since Metallica didn't write science fiction, Shirley had to do it for them. This chronological collection of over a dozen of Shirley's tales contains extensive introductory material and an introduction by Bruce Sterling.

Corrupting Dr. Nice, by John Kessel (Tor). The author of "Buffalo" delivers with a raucous trip through the ages, including baby dinosaurs, the crucifixion, and the assassination of Julius Caesar. Kim Stanley Robinson calls this "the best time travel novel ever written," and who are we to argue?

Robot Blues, by Margaret Weis and Don Perrin (Penguin Roc). A swashbuckling saga of the spaceways reminiscent of the slam-bang action of *Star Wars*.

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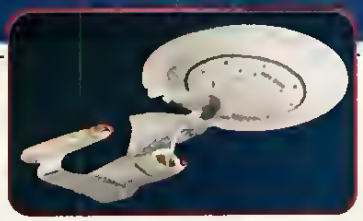


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tive harmony, something astounding to the *Streaker* crew, so used to galactic dissension.

This is no utopia, however. The current peace is hard won and fragile, and just as prey to politics and fanaticism as the civilization *Streaker* knows best. Worse, the Jijoan settlers are technically criminals, coming in separate waves to settle in secret on a world that was supposed to lie fallow, resting and renewing itself through both natural and artificial means. This has led to a kind of collective guilt working on the Jijoans, leading most of them to believe in the Path of Redemption, the process of atoning by allowing themselves to devolve to their earlier pre-sapient innocence in order to reach a new and greater "Uplift." Still, many on Jijo are taking a more progressive path, and the religious tension is growing. Soon after the dolphin ship's arrival the Jijoan "sooners" are undergoing their own organizational crisis as they try to deal with the invaders hunting *Streaker*, and still preserve their society. Soon the earthling and most of the Jijoan settlers are forced to make common cause against mutual enemies, opposed as they are by many of their own people, and aided by as an unlikely band of adventurers as you're liable to find anywhere in SF.

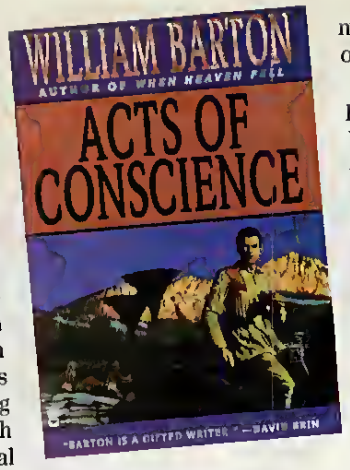
While Brin's work has more than enough straightforward action, the thing that strikes me most is just how *busy* it is. Besides the marvelous in-jokes planted for all to find, there are many levels of action and introspection going on at the same time. A simple plot summary as above might lead the reader to think this is strictly action/adventure space opera, but there's a lot more going on. Brin combines eye-kicks like the massive, vastly ancient starships and machinery consigned to the ocean trenches with the interesting ecological strategy of using oceanic tectonic plates to grind down, melt and recycle them. Then there are the telepathic mule spiders, vast artificial creations given the task of removing all trace of the *Buyurs*, Jijo's former tenants. Then there's the Spectral Flow. Psi stones. Zero-gravity Yoga. A working Difference Engine, functional yet totally undetectable by sensors looking for the cognizance patterns of normal electronic computers. The Galactic Library. And ...well, you get the idea.

Amid all this sense of wonder fodder moves Brin's large cast of characters, active and yet introspective, most of them wrestling with great questions of existence and morality and the road to redemption as they go about defending their homeworld, their ship, and their lives. Matters are often clear-cut, but they are never simplistic. With characters like these advancing the plot, "simplistic" isn't an option. Typically, the partial resolution of the mystery of the Jijoan settlers only leads to more questions.

This introspection also provides the main contrast with Brin's villains. They're not the ones doing the puzzling and soul-searching, nope. They know pretty much what they want, and are after it with reckless disregard. They, to their view, already have the answers. A reader could interpret this as showing that Brin doesn't lavish the care on his villains that he does on his more sympathetic characters. I think this has more to do with the whole idea of hero vs. villain in Brin's book. Brin's villains are the ones who *know*, who never doubt. For, once that doubt creeps in and individuals begin to question, they pretty much stop being villains, and vice versa. Cases in point are the Danik scientist Ling, who switches sides once a native Jijoan teaches her doubt, and the *traeki* sage Asx, who does the same in the opposite direction when the invading *Jophur* graft a "command ring" on his stack of formerly democratic, consensual components, imposing single-minded certainty on the poor creature. I don't know if this approach was deliberate on Brin's part, but it works for me.

Infinity's Shore is technically a middle book and does what a middle book has to do, advancing the plot and setting the stage for the final volume. Some things are resolved but most is still hint and promise. Don't look for neatly tied threads here and, even in the concluding volume, don't look for absolute conclusions; I don't think that's where Brin's interests lie. Even so, taken just on its own, *Infinity's Shore* is a rich and varied skein of stories in the service of a greater one, told from the viewpoints of many very different and sympathetic characters. A part of a bigger tapestry, true, but well worth a look just for itself. This is good stuff.

Richard Parks



***Acts of Conscience**, by William Barton, Warner Aspect, trade, $12.99, 400 pages.*

Let me test the limits of your imagination.

Try to picture a novel that reads like a fusion of Robert Silverberg's melancholy *Dying Inside* (1972) with Heinlein's exuberant *Have Space Suit — Will Travel* (1958). Better yet, envision a book that melds the bleak view of humanity of, say, Disch's *The MD* (1991) with the galaxy-opening notions of Pohl's *Gateway* (1977).

Can't do it? I thought not. But that's because you're not the ambitious and unpredictable William Barton, who, in his latest book, *Acts of Conscience*, has created just such a fusion, representative of a certain kind of '90s SF whose other prime exemplar is John Barnes. And if the result is, as you might expect, jarring to the purist, a tad unbalanced,

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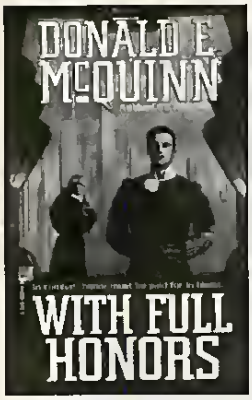
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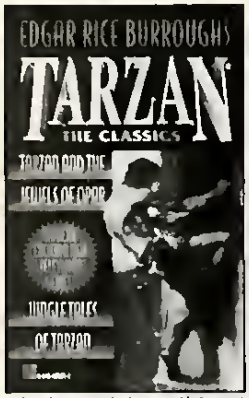
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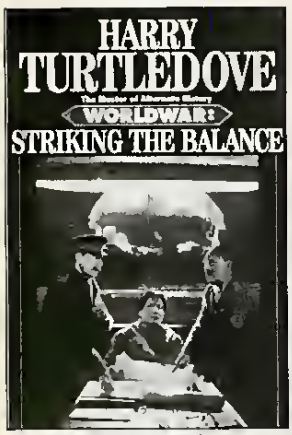
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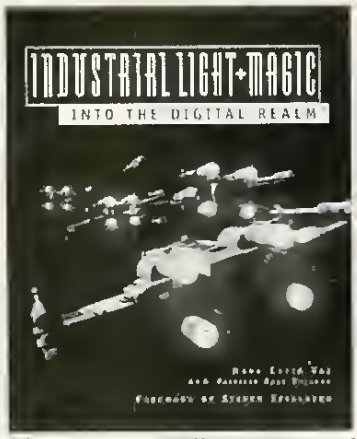
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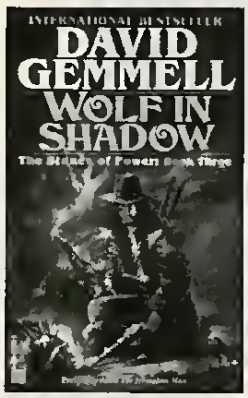
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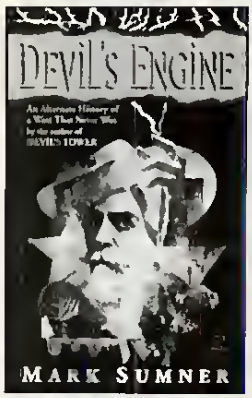
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even a bit schizophrenic — well, such an ambiance pretty much sums up the present state of our culture, doesn't it? And according to Clute's Law, the closer a work of SF comes to capturing the moment it was written in (consider Gibson's *Neuromancer* [1984]), the more dangerous and vital it becomes.

Both Barton and Barnes are masters of cognitive dissonance, the ability to hold opposing views or ideas simultaneously. Steeped in the traditional virtues of SF, eager to create sense-of-wonder perspectives, they are — as hardened Boomers — equally leery of easy answers and button-pushing scenarios. Romantic and cynical, savage and tender, extroverted and agoraphobic, half of each man wants nothing more than to write a modern version of *The Black Star Passes* (1953), while the other half stands ready to tear down the whole fictive apparatus while sneering, "Yeah, right, look at where all that simple-minded goo-goo optimism got us today!"

In his previous book, *The Transmigration of Souls* (1995), Barton found a structure that afforded a perfect balance between cosmic roistering and anguished self-examination: a network of reality-bending stargates through which a cast of representatively flawed and virtuous humans could wander. In *Acts of Conscience* (note the similarly metaphysical title, a tipoff to Barton's focus), the milieu is marginally less innovative, less invigorating, and the entire novel rests on the back of one man. Love or hate the protagonist, you're with him every minute of this book.

Barton divides *Acts* into three unequal sections, and this too contributes to its curious mosaic effect. Chapters One through Five, the first quarter of the book, represent an introduction to our anti-hero, Gaetan du Cheyne, and to his future society. Chapters Six through Sixteen, the bulk of the book, are basically a character-modifying planetary adventure on a single world known as Green Heaven. Chapters Seventeen through Twenty—a mere 65 pages—fully introduce and resolve a threatened cosmological disaster only hinted at earlier, while also quantifying the evolution of du Cheyne's maturing persona.

At the book's start, Barton plunges us into a gritty, fully believable, solar-system-spanning future environment. Mankind has had relativistic star-travel for several *centuries* when the novel opens. From the base of a parklike Earth and richly inhabited outer planets, several human colonies have been established, linked by sublight ships whose unaging crews, of course, return to time-shifted homes. Gaetan du Cheyne is as average a lower-middle-class citizen as this future can boast. A mechanic resident on an orbiting shipyard, his blood threaded with nanotech, his mind linked to AI's, he was born on the settled Moon, educated at a Martian school, and now pulls down a decent wage repairing and maintaining interstellar vessels. In short, a common man. The book is narrated in his voice, and Barton unfailingly succeeds — through use of sentence fragments, keen sensual impressions and a running stream of consciousness — in establishing du Cheyne as a solid, three-dimensional character. However, whether you cotton to him or not is another matter.

As we gradually learn throughout the novel, du Cheyne is one heck of a screwed-up guy. Plagued by a kind of free-floating anomie and ennui only partially attributable to his static culture, he is both a bully and an overly sensitive sort, brave yet cowardly, competent yet capable of balling things up royally, and a woman-worshipping misogynist to boot! For a conflicted book like this one, he is the perfect voice — but you might find his honest confusion grating at times, and feel the urge to deliver a solid kick to his rear long before he himself delivers it.

Du cheyne has invested some of his pay in what amounts to a penny-stock. Imagine his surprise when the company wherein he is a shareholder invents an FTL drive. (Talk about punctuated equilibrium! du Cheyne's torpid universe is about to explode.) He finds himself a millionaire. With the majority of his new wealth, Du cheyne buys one of the experimental FTL ships and sets out to try to learn if his childhood dreams of adventure hold any meaning for the disillusioned adult he has become.

Now the scene switches to Green Heaven, where Greek settlers in the Compact Cities share their world with outback South Africans (another schizoid setup). Du cheyne



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samples city life, then sets out for the wilderness. There, in much the manner of Card's *Speaker for the Dead* (1986), his emotional fate becomes entwined with that of sentient aliens on the verge of extinction, called wolfen and dollies, whose strange commensal relationship must be unraveled.

Not the most minor aspect of the exotic biological puzzle is that the dollies have an erotic effect on human males. *Acts of Conscience*, in fact, is rife with sex, both human-human and human-alien, and readers with aversions toward such scenes should be forewarned. To my taste, Barton follows a rather grim, yet tolerable, realism akin to, say, Nelson Algren's.

On Green Heaven, du Cheyne befriends a nameless member of another starfaring race, one of the *Kapellmeisters*, or puppetmasters. It is through this individual — who proves to be ancient and privy to past mysteries — that the third portion of the novel will unfold. Not to give away any secrets, it concerns both cosmological matters and the possible wiping out of humanity.

The presence of one of Heinlein's patented puppetmasters (surprisingly, as friend, not enemy) brings up the matter of Barton's recursiveness, also present in *Transmigration*. He loves to reference past SF, and here we find a sleazy smuggler named van Rijn, a Captain Hamilton, and du Cheyne's own name, which is tellingly mistaken at one point for "Duquesne," to go along with a computer algorithm named the "Skylark." In fact, du Cheyne's very character might best be interpreted as that of Lazarus Long at the beginning of *Time Enough for Love* (1973): worn out and thanatophilic. Both even share a similar Oedipal fixation.

By novel's end, thanks to having a little sense knocked into his head with the working end of an axe (with nanotech, such edifications are entirely possible), du Cheyne begins to redeem the confusion and havoc he has caused. Let reader beware, though: he cannot stint du Cheyne's pain and still reach the bitter reward.

Paul Di Filippo

Recent and Recommended

SF has grown so large that it has become almost impossible to make sense of it. John Clute, who has also struggled to constrain the vastness of SF between book covers, has written the following about Dave Langford, author of the recently released collection *The Silence of the Langford* (NESFA Press, trade paperback, 278 pages, $15.00): "There is wit here, and great jokes, and a sharp mind. But there's more. David Langford makes us feel welcome in the house of science fiction." Langford, the multiple Hugo Award-winning editor of the fanzine *Ansible*, is the perfect guide through that metaphorical house, for not only has he a wide breadth of knowledge of the field with which to form opinions on anything and everything, but he has also been gifted with an amusing intelligence to back them up. He refers to one particularly long but ill-conceived volume as being "a book with something for everyone, all the way across the cultural scale from people who need doorstops to people who want to start bonfires." About Asimov's attempt to meld his *Robot* and *Foundation* universes into one, Langford says that "mating them together is a like trying to cross a prize bloodhound with Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*." You may not agree with Langford's acerbic musings, but you'll enjoy the ride.

George Clayton Johnson is responsible for some of movie-making's most memorable scenes. He co-authored *Ocean's 11* and *Logan's Run*, wrote the premiere episode of *Star Trek*, and scripted segments of such classic TV shows as *Kung Fu*, *Honey West*, *Route 66*, *Mr. Novak*, and *The Law and Mr. Jones*. But Johnson's most significant contribution to cinematic SF was in his close relationship with *The Twilight Zone*. Johnson shared screenplay credit on the movie version of Rod Serling's classic series, and wrote many of the show's most beloved episodes. Now those scripts and story treatments are gathered together for the first time, presented unedited and in their original format, in *George Clayton Johnson Twilight Zone Scripts & Stories* (Streamline Pictures, trade paperback, 206 pages, $12.95). Works included are for the episodes "All of Us Are Dying," "Kick the Can," "A Game of Pool" and five others. □

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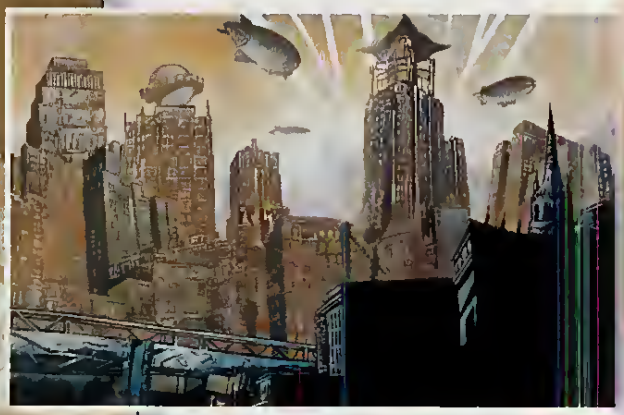
ALTERNATIVE MEDIA



Yesterday's Tomorrow

Comics

Look — up in the sky! Is it a bird? Is it a plane? No, it's *Superman's Metropolis* (DC Comics, 64 pages, $5.95), a superb marriage of Siegel and Shuster's boyhood dream of an otherworldly hero and Fritz Lang's influential 1926 SF film. The latest installment in the Elseworlds series, DC's jewel in the crown that reimagines superheroes in alternate settings (i.e. Sherlock Holmes' London, the time of King Arthur), this graphic novel brings together artist Ted McKeever (whose SFnal *Industrial Gothic*



we covered back in our January 1996 issue) with three top notch writers, the frequent Moebius collaborators Jean-Marc and Randy Lofficier and comics legend Roy Thomas. Imagine the classic SF story of the triumph of the human spirit told with a cast of *Superman* regulars, as one comic book Metropolis is exchanged for the filmic one: Clark Kent as the young man whose privileged life leaves him unaware of the misery in the bowels of the city; Lois Lane, as a young woman who believes that a "superman" will come to free the worker slaves; Lex Luther, whose scientific genius is building a soulless dream city. Visit DC Comics at America Online (Keyword: "DC COMICS") for further details.

Cybersurfing the World Wide Web

Web World

When next you cruise the Internet, don't miss these SF hot spots:

http://www.teleport.com/~mzuzel/

A site devoted to legendary curmudgeon/writer/force-of-nature, Harlan Ellison. A completist's dream, the site contains extensive bibliographic and biographical notes on Ellison. Given Ellison's frequent bashing of online-culture, this is an interesting project — one wonders how the subject feels about it.

http://www.osir.hihm.no/~danso/starwars/

From Norway, land of copyright infringement, comes this *Star Wars* dream-site. Featuring movie clips, sound files, text files, fanfiction, zines, extensive link-lists, and for you serious 3D computer people, 3D meshes of different craft from the *Star Wars* universe to render and animate at home.

http://members.aol.com/dotPulp/

Stark and simple layout and clean, literate copy make this site a great resource for information on the other kind of Pulp Fiction — *Doc Savage*, the *Shadow*, and company.



http://home.earthlink.net/~stormkng/

Visit Storm King Enterprises, an online fantasy weapon store. Apparently, it's cool to send really *big* knives in the mail. Who'd a thunk it?

http://egret0.stanford.edu/hk/index.html

An incredibly dense site, aimed at Hong Kong cinema industry-watchers, attempting to become the *Variety* of Flying-Fist-of-Fury set. The searchable database of Hong Kong films is awesome in its depth and variety.

http://www.columbia.edu/acis/bartleby/strunk/

E. B. White and William Strunk's classic *Elements of Style* a slim volume of rules for clear written communication. This is obligatory reading for anyone hoping to put fingers to keyboard and produce something lucid.

http://www.tnrdlib.bc.ca/rr.html

This readers' robot is the latest in a series of experiments in what is called a "preferences engine." You tell a computer program what you like — in this case, what books you like — and it compares your list to all other respondents' and delivers a list of recommendations. These engines are the future of the Internet, the only way that humans will be able to make sense of a datasphere that doubles in size and complexity every couple weeks.

The Fluke Is Out There

Collectibles

Scully and Mulder had it easy. *The X-Files* duo only had to deal with a single Flukeman, who appeared in the first season episode "The Host." But the rest of us will have to deal with 5,000 of them. That's because Dark Horse Comics is introducing The Flukeman as the first in their limited edition Paranormal Collection series, which will feature museum-quality figurines of the monsters, aliens and creatures from the popular Fox TV show. "Dark Horse has a rich history with Fox, which began the publication of our first *Aliens* comic in 1988," said Dark Horse publisher Mike Richardson, and the quality of this initial offering explains the relationship has continued. The incredibly detailed statuette has been created in 1/8th scale, and is 10 inches high. It comes fully painted, individually numbered, and presented in a full-color collectors' box with a suggested retail price of $125. Sculpting was done by Eisner Award-winner Randy Bowen, who unveiled his initial model at this year's San Diego Comic-Con International to critical acclaim. Bowen will create all future *X-Files* figures in the series. For further information, visit the Dark Horse website at *http://www.dhorse.com.*





Sci-Fi Dialing

Planet Comics may have been the most successful SF comic book ever published. Spun off in 1940 from the pulp magazine *Planet Stories*, this four color cousin printed space opera stories that detailed the adventures of such rugged heroes as Murphy Anderson's *Star Pirate*, Graham Ingels' *Auro, Lord of Jupiter*, and George Evans' *Lost World*. Explorers on jet packs conquered the galaxy, rescuing half-clad damsels in distress who in modern SF would be off exploring on their own. Return with us to that time of far more innocent science fiction with *Planet Comics Phone Cards* (Mercury Marketing). From the dazzling fifteen year run, 73 different covers were chosen to adorn the fronts of these collectible cards. Each phone card contain twenty units of phone time, and only 1,000 of each image will be reproduced, available in better comic book shops everywhere.

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Art is important to us, and if you are a regular reader of *Science Fiction Age*, it's vital to you as well. No other magazine so celebrates SF's cosmic artistry. The only way to see it better would be to have the original hanging on your wall. And for *that* to happen, you'll need Jane Frank, owner of the art gallery Worlds of Wonder. "Selling original illustration art for over forty artists is easy when you're crazy about the stuff yourself," says Frank. Included in those she represents are many of the dreamers whose work you've admired here, such as Bob Eggleton, Jim Burns and Barclay Shaw. Frank's newest catalog features over 125 paintings in full color. Find out more about turning your home into an SF art museum on the Internet at http://www.wow-art.com.

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The Sounds of Sci-Fi

Audio

Before television and the movies took over as the chief sources for dramatic SF, radio was king. Now primarily the home of political pundits and Top 40 tunes, radio was once the home of series like *Buck Rogers* and *Flash Gordon* as well as anthology shows such as *Lights Out* and *Dimension X*. Fans of the theatre of the mind are trying to keep the tradition alive, and two companies have recently stepped forward to tantalize the ear, each with a different approach. *Radio's Golden Age of Science Fiction* (Satellite Broadcasting, $14.95) has packaged the best of yesterday's futures in a four hour compilation containing excerpts from over 100 different classic radio shows, including *X-Minus One* and Orson Welles' *War of the Worlds*. For further information contact the company at 1-800-747-0856. *Great Science Fiction Stories* (Infinivox Audio, $10.99) attacks the problem from another cosmos, presenting all-new dramatizations of today's finest short story writers, including *Science Fiction Age* regulars Robert Reed, Geoffrey A. Landis and Stephen Baxter. Each title runs approximately 50-90 minutes. For details, call 1-800-860-3910. Whether you choose the best of yesterday or today, your ears will thank you.



NEW ON VIDEO

The Island of Dr. Moreau: [illegible] science gone wrong [illegible] later. Marlon Brando takes [illegible] reins from the memorable Charles Laughton, who played the mad genius in the 1932 version *Island of Lost Souls*.

Independence Day: With *Mars Attacks!* on to arrive in the theaters, it's time to revisit the other alien invasion blockbuster, which was last summer's most eagerly awaited sci-fi release. They took Manhattan, now take them to your house.

The Nutty Professor: Eddie Murphy made a comeback hit by putting a '90s spin on Jerry Lewis' 1963 original. Special effects guru Rick Baker used state-of-the-art makeup magic to transform the slim comedian into his earth-shaking alter ego.

Toy Story: Tom Hanks and Tim Allen provide the lead voices and Randy Newman con[illegible] Disney's [illegible] animated marvel. Other actors include [illegible] Rickles and Wallace Shawn, but the real star of the film is the Pixar process itself that brought the mix to life.

Dragonheart: "You will believe," said the film's tagline, and the Industrial Light and Magic's visual effects wizards made good on their promise. Dennis Quaid joins with Sean Connery (as the voice of Draco) in the touching and adventure-filled tale of a dragon and [illegible]'s hunter.

Flesh Gordon: The over-the-top spoof of sci-fi action serials is back in a Deluxe Collectors Edition containing 10 minutes of previously unseen footage. Join Flesh as he travels to the planet Porno to save Earth from a mysterious sex ray. Available in both R and unrated versions.



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By Melissa J. Perenson

A big screen *Next Generation* crew treks through time to battle the Borg.



ABOVE: To mark their move to the silver screen, the Borg have been made more horrifying and threatening. BELOW: Captain Picard (Patrick Stewart) and Data (Brent Spiner) must fight to save both past and future.

THERE'S A LEGEND ABOUT STAR TREK FILMS: THE best Trek films are always those with even-numbered designations. If that's the case, then *Star Trek: First Contact* has true potential. After all, this is no ordinary Trek film. *First Contact* is the first film to feature solely feature the cast of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. It's being released in this, the year that marks *Star Trek*'s 30th anniversary. The Borg are back, as relentless and as sinister as ever. There's time travel — the crew has to travel back in time to keep the Borg from tampering with events in the past. And, to top it off, *First Contact* has legend on its side.

Back for this go around is the entire *Next Generation* cast — Patrick Stewart, Jonathan Frakes, Brent Spiner, Michael Dorn, Gates McFadden, Marina Sirtis, and LeVar Burton. Rounding out the talent pool are Academy Award-nominees James Cromwell, who portrays Zefram Cochrane, the 21st century inventor of the starship warp drive system, and Alfre Woodard, in the role of his determined assistant, Lily Sloane.

In the director's chair is the versatile Frakes, who's no stranger to pulling double-duty both behind and in front of the camera. Although this is Frake's first time directing a feature, Frakes has honed his skills directing eight episodes of of *Next Generation*, as well as episodes of *Voyager* and *Deep Space Nine*, and *Diagnosis Murder*. It was within a few months of *Generation's* release that the next Trek feature was already under discussion. "I didn't get much of a break between the two movies," admits former *Next Generation* scribe Brannon Braga, who serves as supervising producer of *Star Trek Voyager* and co-wrote both *Generations* and *First Contact*.

"We instantly knew we wanted the film to feature the Borg; that's about the only thing we did know," Braga recalls of the initial story meetings he had with producer Rick Berman and co-writer Ronald D. Moore back in early 1995. "We felt like we'd never seen the Borg the way we really wanted to, which is with a big screen budget. Then we thought, it would be great to do the Borg invading Earth; but, we've already seen big battles around Earth." That's where the time-travel element comes in. "What if the Borg had a secret plan to go back in time, to stop first contact with an alien race and to assimilate Earth in that time period, in order to assimilate Earth in the future?"

Around a half-dozen time periods were considered as a destination in the past, including the Renaissance. "But the one we thought would be most interesting was the time when *Star Trek* was born," says Braga. "After a little digging, we came across this hero in *Trek* lore named Zefram Cochrane, who created warp drive. We figured that's what probably led to first contact with an alien race, which probably brought humanity into interplanetary space travel, and eventually led to the formation of the Federation and *Star Trek* itself."

First Contact has a decidedly action slant. "This is very much a Star Trek movie; the message and the philosophies are Star Trek through and through. It's got heart, it's got interesting thematic material, but at the same time, it's definitely the most action-packed *Star Trek* film *ever*. We wanted to do something that really kicked butt in the action department. *Generations* had some great action sequences in it, but it was also a very ponderous film, a very philosophical film. We thought that maybe it was time, as a change of pace, to kick it into high gear, and have a much more action-oriented story. And that was a conscious decision on our part."



The film was originally given the working title of *Star Trek Resurrection*, "but that was always very tentative," remarks Braga. "We settled on *First Contact*; it was the coolest choice. Rick Berman's wife came up with that title."

It took three drafts before the writers found the right balance for the story. "You realize after the first draft that certain things don't work," explains Braga.

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"One of the things that didn't work was that we, strangely enough, didn't have Captain Picard in direct conflict with the Borg; he basically was on the planet's surface dealing with things, and Riker was on the ship fighting the Borg. So we decided to change that, to flip their roles. That led to the biggest change in the film, namely that Picard was going to face the demons of his past, and face the Borg once more. There's something of a vengeance theme with Picard. That brought Picard much more into focus, and really helped all aspects of the film."

Also gone is the romantic sub-plot between Lily and Picard. "In the first draft, it was a full-on romance, and they fell in love. But it was wrong. It was just wrong from the get-go," Braga says emphatically. "Never would have worked. Woodard and Stewart are terrific together, and there's a romantic subtext of sorts, but we pulled it back, because Picard is hardly going to have a full-fledged romance when the Borg are about to take over Earth. The whole thing was completely rethought from the ground up. It's not a romance at all now; it's more of an uneasy friendship."

Even though Frakes has assumed directing duties, don't assume you'll be seeing any less of the First Officer on the bridge. Quite the opposite, actually; Riker has a central role in the story "Whether the actors will admit it or not, everyone's got a great role in this movie," asserts Braga.

One thing you won't be seeing in this film is the crescent-shaped VISOR device that allowed the blind Chief Engineer Geordi La Forge to see. The decision to lose the VISOR, says Braga, "came primarily from LeVar Burton. He was sick of wearing the damn oil can on his head, and I don't blame him." Instead, LaForge will see using ocular implants which make his irises appear as though they have circuitry embedded within them.



The character of Lily Sloane (Alfre Woodard) started out as Picard's love interest, but her role became more action-oriented with each script revision.

If there's one thing that stands out in Braga's mind about *First Contact*, it's that "the film is about personal responsibility, greed, and selfishness," Braga says thoughtfully. "It's also about stopping to think for two seconds that maybe you might have a greater social responsibility. The theme of this movie is best encapsulated in the character of Zefram Cochrane, a man who has to realize he's got to take a bigger view of the world than just his own little problems."

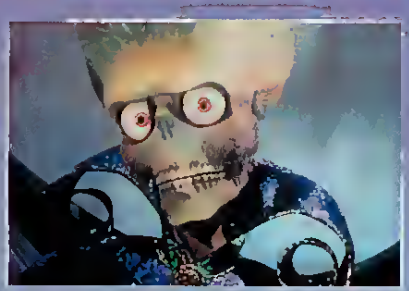
In making the leap to the big-screen, the Borg's appearance has been altered to appear more horrifying and threatening, a necessary concession to the unforgiving, intense scrutiny of the movie camera. "On the TV show, they were cool. But if you look at them, they're basically guys wearing black jumpsuits, with little cybernetic pieces planted on their body. That's just not going to hold up on the big screen. So we redesigned them. They have the same basic look to them, of course; we just made them more elaborate, with more

Tim Burton's MARS ATTACKS! invades your local theater.

NASA's recent discovery of fossilized life forms on Mars is a press agent's dream, coming as it does just before bug-eyed, big-brained, raygun-toting Martians (as seen at right) fly in on bubble-topped saucers to wreak havoc on Earth's denizens in *Mars Attacks!*, Tim Burton's forthcoming all-star love song to the alien invasion movies of the '50s and '60s.

"They're okay when they're little wormy things," says Danny DeVito, who plays a shaky lawyer, comparing the real-life discovery to the film's aliens. "As soon as they turn into these big-headed green people come shooting you with laser guns, that's when you've got to worry about 'em."

Burton hopes that come winter, all of the film-going public will be worrying about his sci-fi flick based on the original 1962 *Mars Attacks!* card series. Issued during the height of the Cold War by the Brooklyn-based Topps chewing gum company, the series depicted shocking, gory scenes of Martian hordes pillaging Earth. Humans were decapitated, cities burned, the White House was annihilated; even the family dog got zapped. Not surprisingly, a public outcry caused the cards to be pulled from distribution. "That was the inspiration for the whole thing," says Jonathan Gems, who wrote the screenplay for the forthcoming adaptation. "It's basically the same story as *War of the Worlds* — but it's got a twist, which is that it is a comedy. Tim wanted to do something that was really gruesome and grisly and funny, like those cards are."



"It's retro but not retro," says longtime Burton collaborator and former Oingo Boingo frontman Danny Elfman. "This movie has a sensibility that taps back to the '50s and '60s, but it's not a parody of a '50s or '60s movie."

Gone is any trace of a peace-loving E.T. reaching out to commune with the human race. These Martians are bad. They're mean. And they're not here to make friends. "They're actually fun-loving but they don't know what fun is," says producer Larry Franco. "They don't know what nasty is. What they think is fun is not quite the same as what we think is fun. So, it's a combination of fun and horror. What they do is horrific, but they do it unknowingly, which makes it not as horrific. You almost feel sorry for our little Martians, though you probably shouldn't."

The star-studded ensemble cast includes Jack Nicholson as President James Dale, Glenn Close as his obsessive-compulsive First Lady, Annette Bening as a new age guru wife, plus Pierce Brosnan, Jim Brown, Paul Winfield, Martin Short, Danny DeVito, Lucas Haas, Michael J. Fox, Pam Grier, Lisa Marie, Sylvia Sydney, and superstar entertainer Tom Jones. Rod Steiger plays a warmongering general who recalls George C. Scott's Gen. Buck Turgidson in *Dr. Strangelove (Or How I Learned To Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb)*.

Ironically, one of the most famous *Mars*

elaborate arm mechanisations, and more elaborate head pieces and head make-up."

Although Braga declines to provide details about the Borg Queen, who's played by Alice Krige, he does offer, "She's pretty creepy looking. She's like the other Borg, half-human and half-cyborg, and yet she has a distinct look that you've never seen." Braga is also hesitant to discuss the Borg Queen's role within Borg society. "The Borg are still a Collective, hive mind, we're not changing that. The last thing we want to do is redefine who the Borg are. But we are introducing a new element, because we wanted to personify the Borg in a character. Basically, she is a part of the Collective who controls the hive, and gives guidance when necessary. She has a little more sentience, a little more autonomy."

"Their wardrobe, their appliances, the concept of the Borg as entities became entirely more serious with the creation of the Borg characters you're going to see in *First Contact*," adds production designer Herman Zimmerman, who's worked on *Next Generation's* pilot, the past three *Star Trek* films, and currently is with *Deep Space Nine*. "These Borg are every bit as threatening, even horrifying, as the Frankenstein monster, for instance. Movie monsters are a favorite of movie fans, and I think the Borg we've created are going to fall right in line with all of the classic movie monsters. Having the opportunity to do that, and to create the environment for these creatures, is part of the challenge of the design of the production."

Continued on page 100

Attacks! cards pictures the White House blowing up, an image that became the calling card of *Independence Day*. "I was shocked when I saw it," says Gems. "But Tim has been through this before. He knows that it's important to be secretive and he didn't want to announce this thing."

Fortunately, says Franco, "Our film is a completely different experience on every level. It's about a Martian attack on Earth and how it affects life here. That's the essence of the movie. Of course it's not the normal Martian attack that you might think — because it's Tim Burton's Martians attacking

Mars Attacks! opens December 13.





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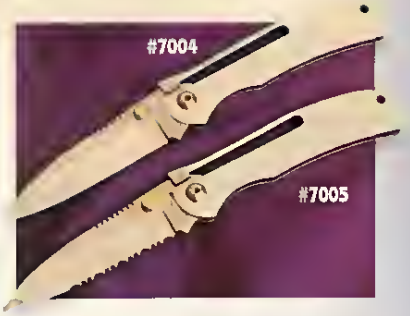


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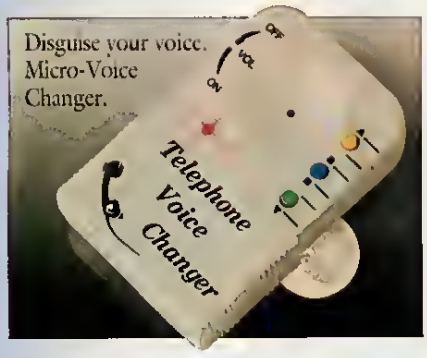
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By Stephen Baxter and Gregory Benford

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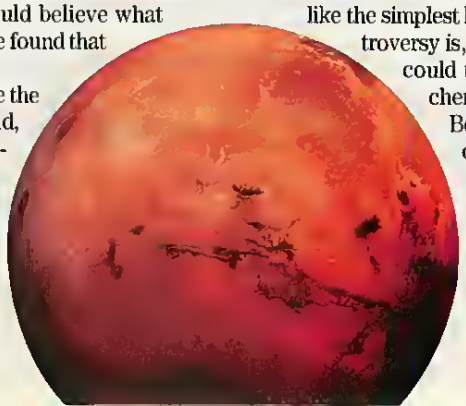
We've found our Martians, and luckily, they're nothing like the inhabitants of the Red Planet who find us in this season's alien invasion blockbuster Mars Attacks *(above).*

NASA'S RECENT ANNOUNCEMENT OF THE DISCOVERY of evidence pointing towards the existence of life on Mars in the distant past electrified both the science fiction and scientific communities. With talk shows, news programs, and the Internet ablaze with heated discussion as to the validity of this discovery, we thought it wise to bring together two scientist/SF writers to discuss the nature and effect of the Mars media event. What does it all mean? And most importantly, where do we go from here?

Stephen Baxter is the author of seven science fiction novels, including *Voyage* (due out in January and reviewed in this issue), about how NASA could have gone to Mars by 1986. Baxter, with a background in math and engineering, has also published non-fiction on NASA's historical turning points. Gregory Benford has spent almost three decades as a leading writer of Hard SF, as demonstrated by his classic novel *Timescape*, which won the Nebula and John W. Campbell awards. Benford is also a professor of physics at the University of California, Irvine.

SF AGE: Please explain to the lay person the nature of the evidence by which we should believe what NASA is telling us. What have we found that causes us to be so excited?

BENFORD: First, it looks like the earliest forms on Earth. Second, nearby chemicals suggest biological processing and waste materials like those we have seen on Earth. Third, the date looks about right for the origin of Earthly life, three to four billion years ago.



BAXTER: There's also the evidence that causes us to think that the rock is from Mars in the first place. The composition of this meteorite from Antarctica matches the composition of gases in the rocks that Viking found and studied on Mars. So that's pretty compelling. And there've been good studies that have shown that it's likely that 40% of all the rock that gets blasted off Mars each year by meteorite strikes will finish up on Earth because of its strong gravity well. It may take billions of years to get here, but it will get here. So we know it's a rock from Mars, we know this stuff is in there. And because it's deeply buried at the core of the rock, not near the surface, reduces the chance that it's contamination from the Earth.

BENFORD: All these make a consistent view. They depend upon numerical simulations of the probability of getting rock from Mars to Earth, and arguments that William Schopf of UCLA has made about the chemical synthetic processes of early life, which he verified on rock deposits here. As in the best of science, a lot of arrows point to the same conclusion.

BAXTER: That's true. The life hypothesis actually looks like the simplest hypothesis. A prime bit of the controversy is, are those really microfossils? Or could they be formed by some kind of chemical or geologic pressures? Because they are half as small as any comparable biological microfossil formation on Earth. Other people are saying they're kind of too small to have the required complexity of structure. Although I think my instinct is that it's going to take some guy on Mars climb-

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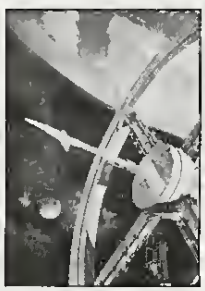
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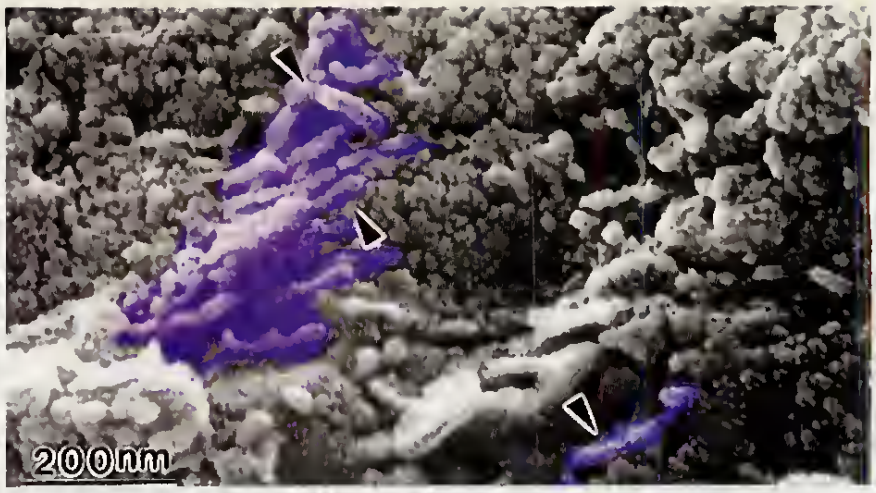
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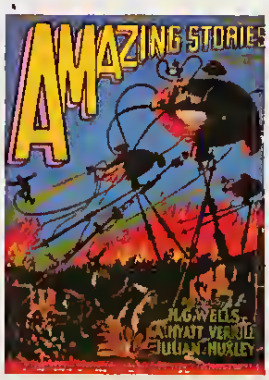
ABOVE: Signs of life or just ancient geological formation? A NASA photo presents the evidence. BELOW: H.G. Wells wrote about a different kind of Martian contact.

ing down into a volcanic vent to get really definitive proof. My reaction is that I was instantly electrified. I was also terrified that it was more NASA hype. I wish it hadn't been NASA, really. But it struck me that there are really two classes of possibilities. One is that the life has got some elements in common with our own, and the other is that it doesn't. And if it *does*, that's electrifying, because of the possibility of panspermia. You know — maybe life is of a common origin, maybe it was blasted from Earth to Mars, or from Mars to Earth, or from a third place to both. And that raises the possibility that life, once it arises somewhere, will spread from natural causes to other planets, or even to other stars. The other possibility, that it is *not* like our own, is electrifying, too. I mean, suppose it's based on silicon, or an ammonia solvent, or something. Or even uses our common water chemistry in a fundamental different way. That's exciting, because it means that life as we can recognize it arises spontaneously in different environments. So we can expect to find life on Mars, Europa, the clouds of Jupiter, the new planets we're finding around other stars and so on. So either possibility is exciting.

BENFORD: I agree. Electrifying. The association of chemical states near the small globules makes the discovery plausible. The bigger issue is that this life arose apparently quite early, and that has immense implications for SETI: our quick origin of life was not unusual. I still have a reservation about the SETI argument, because the big jump in our biosphere was from single cell to multiple cell. That took billions of years. If we are accidentally lucky in that regard, and it doesn't typically take one to two billion years but takes five to six billion — a mere factor of three. Then the galaxy has very little advanced intelligent life. That's still an open possibility. Therefore, assuming this Mars result is true, has this single cellular life made any development beyond. The media concentrated on the immediate questions. That's fine. By pure coincidence, a month before, I had read the summary of a meeting in London last year about life in thermal vents on earth. There's a plausible argument among the micro–biologists that it is the oldest life form on earth. It differs significantly genetically from the other kingdoms of life, subsisting on a sulfur processing biochemistry. Vents are an imminently plausible site for life to hole up in, as the Martian biosphere dried out, and the atmosphere diffused away. Percolating in volcanic thermal vents on Mars for three billion years! They could still be there, buried deep: it will take a significant mission to ferret them out. You will probably have to have a sophisticated sample return mission at minimum to settle this question. I personally believe you will need a manned mission. Definitive proof requires that you climb down some thermal vent holes and scrape the walls. I don't know how to design a robot to do that. Robots can't walk well over rough terrain.

BAXTER: That's right. Any kind of plausible sample return mission on the drawing boards now is going be another a kind of Viking–like scoop of loose surface regolith, bring back a handful of stuff. So I think you're right. You've got to have somebody in the spot with tools in the spot, and authority to study this stuff.

BENFORD: If you take our thermal vent life and expose it to Martian UV, it's dead in minutes. No scooper will find it. No life form would bother to venture out of the vent hole; no percentage in it. So even if you landed right on top of it — and notice how hard *that* is, in such quilted, volcanic terrain — you wouldn't find it. The real problem is that absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. And a robot that doesn't find life proves nothing. Be optimistic; say we get a sample return that whets our appetite. We go there and



Continued on page 102

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The Visitors came from the future to make him pay for the past.

BY JACK DANN
Illustration by Greg Carter

BLIND EYE

THEY CAME TO HIM after she died, when he was in shock, or so he thought; but that was all guess-work now, for his memory was as confused as time itself.

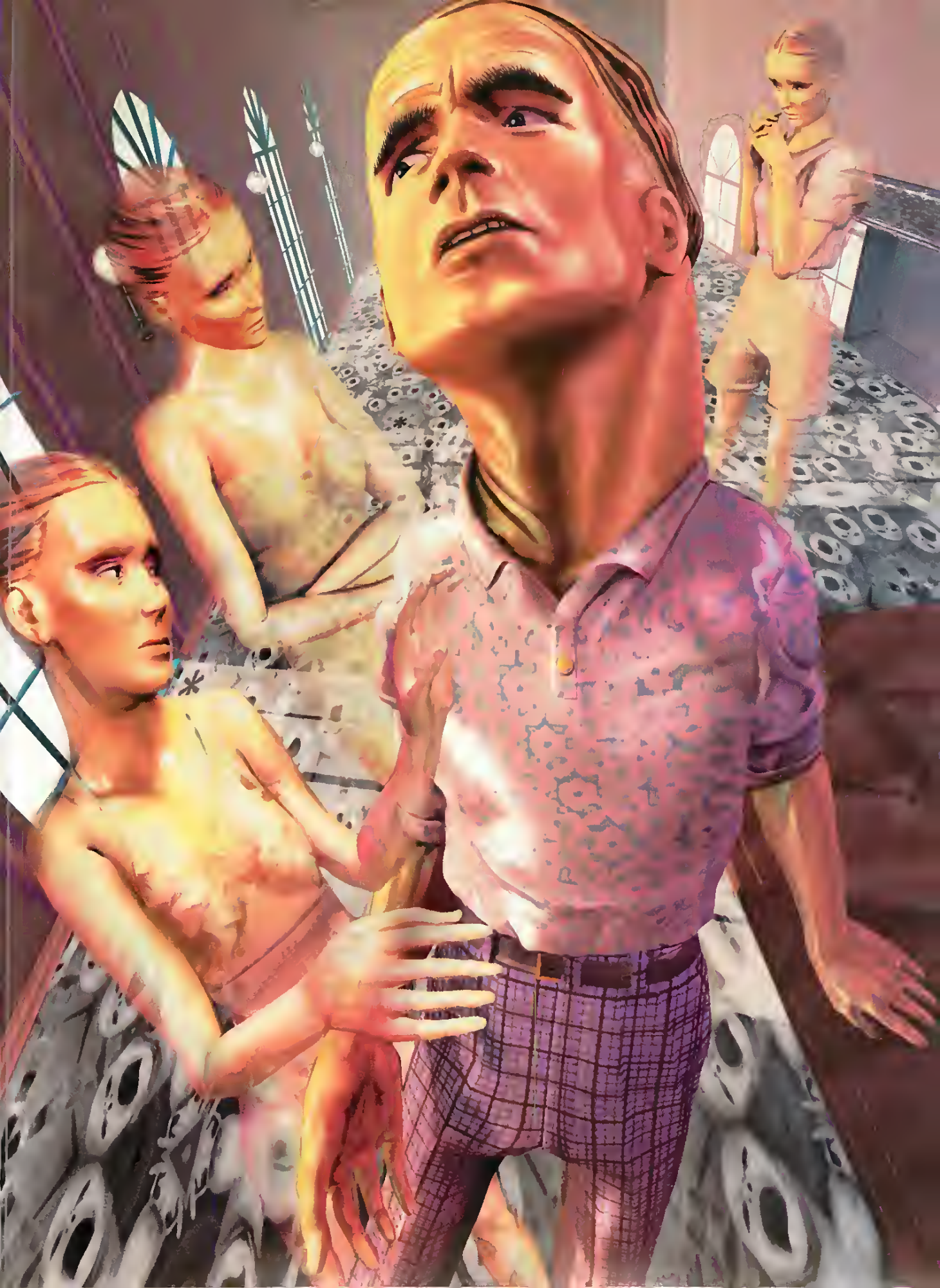
His name was Carlos Smlta, a name that amused even the travelers, who had names such as Chanvehlos Charbrehsts, Vlahos Lahknnikechaner, and Myhrna Zhastenchaslatis (all 'ch' sounds pronounced as gutturals). He was born in Syracuse, New York in 1945. His mother was Jewish, of Spanish descent; his father was a Burmese diplomat. He was educated at a Sandscroft Military Academy and at Yale, where he majored in political science; but he dropped out of law school to act in regional theater. After turning on and dropping out, he became successful organizing and directing political campaigns and became a painter only after he married the artist Helen Reginald, who taught at Columbia University. As a result of his early (and altogether unearned) success, they divorced, only to marry again when the Hawkin's Gallery in Manhattan took her on and sold her paintings for ludicrous prices.

That's when he bought her this huge, sprawling, Greek Revival house in upstate New York as a wedding gift.

He sat in the living room, on a blue velvet couch before a figured marble fireplace and waited for visitors. The fireplace was clean, for he never used it; a slight keening could be heard as air was sucked past the ancient flue, which was closed. Above the fireplace was a large mirror, it reflected the main staircase, the door to the servant's stairs, and Helen's studio. He kept it exactly as she had left it: Chinese lithographs over a fireplace that never worked, for heating pipes had been run through the chimney to save money; easels set side by side, for she worked on several paintings at once, and was far more prolific than he; her collection of photographs, piled in a box on the floor under the butler table; hard cover and paperback books crammed into unpainted floor-to-ceiling bookshelves; bric-a-brac on tables, mostly wooden and ceramic elephants; ashtrays still filled with lipstick stained cigarette butts; and a small television, which was on, its screen myriad blue dots of static: a soft, infinite cough.

The only difference in the room was the drawn curtains. Helen loved the light, and this house seemed to bask in sunlight. But now her room was as dark and shadowy as autumn twilight.

The visitors appeared in the light streaming through the high living room windows; they shimmered like the dust motes in the warm buttery effluence, then took shape, as so many rainbows after a sun shower in the Catskills; and Carlos rose to stand in the light, yearning to be lifted backward in time — he only needed to travel back a few weeks, or even days, to be back with Helen, to see her naked as she rushed from shower to bedroom, her breasts heavy and pendulous; or to see her in her studio, her heart-shaped face staring intently at one or another of her canvasses, her face that belied her age, for at thirty-eight she looked like a teenager. Nevertheless, he could not find her. He was a magnet for the visitors, but could not break loose himself, could not swim through time. He was dead weight.



Carlos lifted his arms and turned slowly, for he could feel the warmth of the sunlight on his face and hands, and he imagined that he could feel the life fields of the visitors as they threaded and fluoresced into separate forms, from light and current to the appearance of flesh and viscera ... from the sighing of fabric to the mewling of children rolling on the floor as if spilled from cribs and cradles; and the aching silence of the adult visitors who moved each in his or her own direction, yet seemed like one being ... one mind thinking to itself.

"Is this where you killed her?" asked a slender woman, whose face was veiled in the same black yet almost transparent material as her gown. Her hair was cut very short in what used to be called a 'butch,' and her eyes, which were hard and purple as amethyst, seemed to have a life of their own, as if they were absorbing information into themselves, as if they were two minds abstracted from the woman who spoke to Carlos. She stepped away from her family, which was how Carlos always thought of the groups of visitors, and stood before him, touching him with her long, cold fingers. Carlos stood very still and imagined that her touch was speech, for, indeed, her mouth did not move, yet her thoughts could be heard as words.

"No," Marcos said, suddenly pulling away from her, directing her to the foot of the staircase that faced the front door. "There ... I think." But he could not really remember, for memory was a dull, resounding emptiness, an aching frustration that worsened when he tried to push past the gauzy filaments of the here and now.

She inhaled through her mouth, drawing the veil against her lips. "You slapped your wife; I can visualize it, and you called your son to intercede. But he came too late, you had already struck her ... no, you didn't strike her. You tried, but you smashed your hand right here." She slid her hand over the rounded newel cap of the banister. "You broke your hand."

Carlos nodded, trying to remember, trying so hard ... . Even now his fingers ached. But that was meaningless. What was *now*? He was trapped in *this* thin sliver of time. Yet he felt that he had lived an eternity here at his station, as one of the visitors had called it. He *felt* that he had met thousands of visitors here, yet he could not really remember. He could only compare this place, this whorl in time, to Lethe, Dante's river of forgetfulness. Had he relived this same conversation over and over with this same visitor? Perhaps, but somehow he did not think so ... could not allow himself to think so. Time could not be so hard and dense.

"But you did not hit her," continued the visitor.

"She fell," Carlos said, blinking, as if he knew the past viscerally, but without lasting memory, memory that could heal him and keep him whole.

"When your son restrained you. She fell backward and struck her head ... there." The visitor kneeled and examined the doorjamb that led into Helen's studio. Then she looked up at Carlos and asked, "Why do you blame yourself?"

"Isn't it obvious?"

"It was her doing," the visitor said.

"You mean she *chose* to fall backward and hit her head?"

"Yes, of course," said the visitor, as if it was obvious, as if all causality was conscious intention. "Would you prefer if I stayed with you?" she asked, her back to him, for she was still kneeling before the door, as if praying to his wife's spiritual presence. Then stood before him and pulled the veil away from her face.

She was, of course, Helen.

He gasped and reached for her; and in that instant, he thought to strike her; as if that would break the spell, break him out of this bondage to time and the visitors. He slid his extended fingers through her thick, straight hair, and pulled her toward him, smelling her breath and odor, which were Helen's ... only Helen seemed a reflection, a recollection in Carlos' mind, of this visitor who embraced him with her long, cool arms, who kissed him with dry lips, as if she were paper, no less a phantom than the other visitors who splashed through the rooms of this house like ocean breakers. Carlos could hear their thoughts, as static, as interference. As anger. They minds were directed at him, but also toward the wraith in his arms. Her business was to be with them, to guide them, amuse them, protect them, pay attention to them; and Carlos imagined that she was as much a prisoner as he. He could feel her regret as she pulled away from him to join the others, who were as tall as she and dressed in veils and simple gowns, men and women alike; only the children were naked, tousle-haired, knee-dimpled, and barefooted. The children were like ants running in every direction, into every room, to return with treasures, as if back to the hive. One slightly pot-bellied, golden haired girl with flawless white skin that looked as if sun had never touched it, ran out of Helen's studio with a book clutched against her chest. It was an illustrated coffee table book and half her size.

"Please would you tell me," she asked Carlos, although she was playing to her entire family, "why your cat grins like that?" Then she handed the book to one of the adult visitors, who pressed it into nothingness as if he were squeezing an accordion, and changed into an ugly caricature of Quintin Mastys' *Ugly Duchess*, which served as the model for Lewis Carroll's duchess in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. She simply changed shape, as if she were some heavy liquid being poured into a vertical form. Her mouth was shaped like a pocket; her triangular face, which was as large as the rest of her body, was covered with stubble; indeed, her face seemed to be formed of two triangles: an outer, which framed it, and an inner, which was made up of her bulbous nose, mouth, and the deep wrinkles that connected the corners of each. She was wearing a huge night bonnet and a velvet gown with panniers that exaggerated her enormous hips. The change complete, she said, "It's a Cheshire cat, and that's why. Pig!" She addressed her last word to Carlos with such intensity that he flinched. The other children changed into ordinary orange cats, except for the needle-toothed grins in the shape of crescent moons, and silently stared at Carlos, as if it were his turn to perform. After a pause, the transformed duchess said, "You don't know much, and that's a fact." With that she grew, elongated, poured herself into an adult, became Helen, as did all the others, including the adults, and they streamed out of the house like smoke until the room was quiet.

Carlos followed them outside, but he couldn't see them ... he could only hear them. They were examining his house, for he could hear a repetition of architectural terms.

Doric order.

Pediment roof.

Tympanum.

Ionic Order

Architrave.

Transom.

Return.

That last word, the sighing of wind as they left, materializing as chiaroscuro faces made of shadow and sunshine, Cheshire grins dissipating, disappearing, for they were smoke. Yet he had touched one, had embraced her; but that was time he had held — the stuff of souls and mind and life ... and memory, for when the visitors flowed out of their own time, they became at once the observer and the observed.

Dreamers dreaming.

The stuff of time itself.

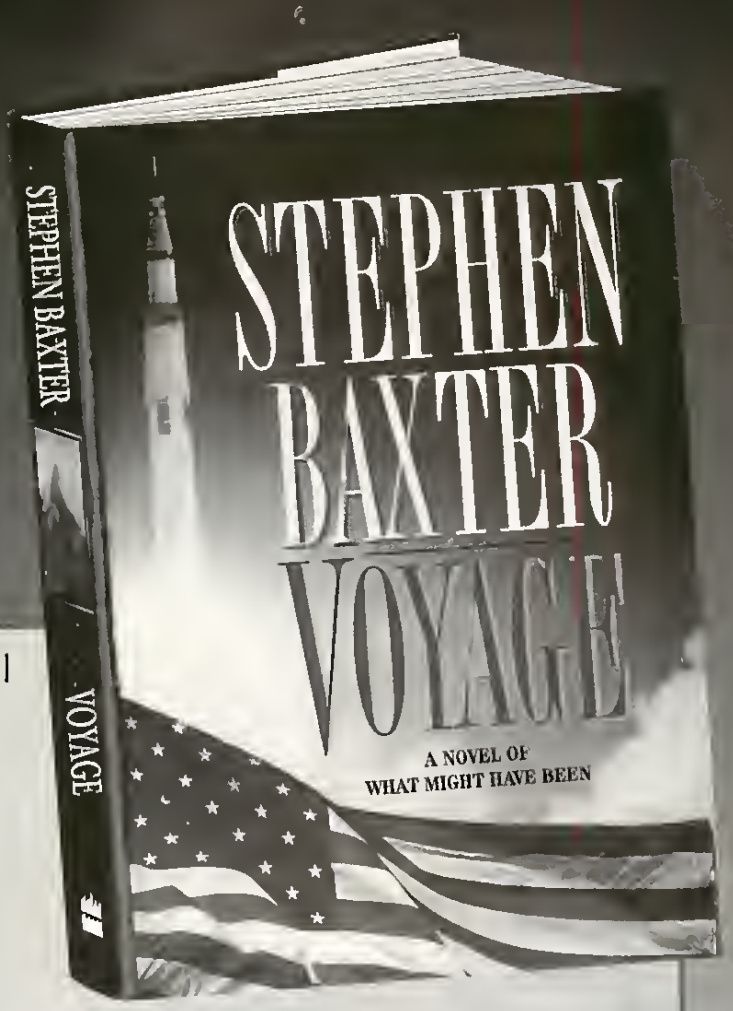
Ghosts.

CARLOS FOUND HIMSELF BACK INSIDE THE HOUSE, AS IF HE HAD BUT dreamed the visitation, dreamed of following spirits into the eternal afternoon light. He went back out to look for the travelers. The air was warm, without even a hint of breeze; the street was empty, silent. He looked at the public gardens across the highway; they were ablaze with flowers: violets, anemone, blue and yellow *Aquilegias*, harebells, day lilies, gentian, purple and scarlet foxglove, red poppies, and virgin white *Astilbe Japonica*. Beyond the gardens was the burning

EXPERIENCE THE JOURNEY

STEPHEN BAXTER

VOYAGE



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white ribbon of another highway. Then hills. The afternoon was two-dimensional, lacking even a hint of shadow, all hard brightness and primary color. Carlos started down the painted blue steps of his front porch ... only to fall back into the watery gray light of his living room.

THE VISITORS RETURNED, STREAMING BACK INTO HIS LIVING ROOM, gathering themselves into their proper individual selves, preparing to return to their own places in the time-stream where flesh could not be easily transformed by thought. No doubt they expected to pass through him, like a turnstile, and return to their fleshy future.

But that was not to be.

Although the visitors still retained Helen's form — each child and adult a perfect replica of his wife — Carlos could, for the first time, it seemed, see them as they really were. He stepped backward, recoiling from them. These might well be visitors from the future, but they were not human. Or what Carlos could imagine as human. He wasn't repelled by their physical aspect: they seemed nothing more than shifting shapes, shadows No, it was that he could feel them using him, tasting him, draining him. He sensed them as a sort of malignant void ... and finally, finally, he remembered ... .

Remembered that he had seen them in a dream when he was a child.

They had come to him then, as if to test him. He saw them as creatures of smoke pouring into his bedroom as he lay in his bed, invading, filling him with purpling darkness. He had pushed himself against the black lacquer headboard until he was sitting up, and he looked around the room. Awake or asleep ... he did not know. The familiar objects were all in their places: the Golden Children's Lihrary books in their own mahogany bookstand, his Charlie McCarthy marionette lying on his desk as if choked by his own threads, an oval of train track with a Lionel "H.O." engine and two box cars, favorite picture books, a wind-up elephant that could turn circles while a propeller whirled atop its head, stacks of baseball trading cards, and his collection of tournament yo-yos. All his stuff was there, everything in place, but the room was suffused with a wan, alien light that was ... wrong, that glowed like neon seen through fog, like the dial of his new Boliva watch; and a face gazed in at him through the window over his desk. The face filled his second floor bedroom window.

It was Helen's face.

Looking into his room.

Into him ... .

Carlos remembered that dream as the visitors drew closer to him as if he were the light and they were ghostly, wingless moths. He remembered it as they used his memories and pain, the very fabric of what he was, to try to fuel their escape back to their own time, where they might crystallize into flesh creatures.

But this time Carlos entered *their* thoughts and memories. Gained strength from *them*. And as he did so, he remembered everything, every visit, every traveler who had passed through his terminus to eavesdrop on the past. This time, this time he would act, would break free; he would not let them hollow him out again. Not again.

Carlos imagined a myriad of pasts and presents and futures spreading out around him as if he were the hub of a great insubstantial wheel. He was the hub and terminus of this tiny whorl of time; and these shades gathering around him were caught in but one slipstream, as he had once been.

As he closed himself off to them, trapping them here, he understood that, indeed, they were human. They were simply smoothed out and ground down by the eons. They were more thought than muscle, flesh tempered by idea. As Carlos pushed himself into the fragile fabric of their thoughts, tearing and rending as they had done to him, he recognized his kinship with them. Now he was the parasite, sensing, experiencing, fueling himself with their hopes and fears and jealousies. Remembering. He burrowed deeper, growing stronger, and the visitors fled from him in panic. They gathered in Helen's studio, as if to regroup for an attack.

Only the one who had embraced him with long, cool arms remained. Carlos could see her as Helen, as many superimpositions of human forms; but her strongest aspect was that of the veiled woman with the short hair and hard amethyst eyes.

"You have come to me before," Carlos said. He could not help but feel a wild joy, as memory flooded him, overpowered him, but that was followed by the sharp pain of recognition and remorse.

"As have many others."

"No, you came to me when I was a child."

The visitor stood before him. She was as still as a faint image on a photograph.

"You came to me as a dream." Carlos continued, even though she said nothing. "You revealed Helen to me."

"You called me back."

"You ... ?"

"Yes," she said.

"You are Helen."

"Yes. You have called us all back, pulled us from our timestreams, gathered us to you in your pain and blindness."

"All the others ... ."

"No, they are just travelers, using you as a terminus."

"And you?"

"I am their lodestone," Helen said, then paused. "You infected your own childhood, your own dreams."

"After I killed you," Carlos said. He could see the timelines extending, winding outward, all wound around him, squeezing, choking him ... .

"You didn't kill me," Helen said.

"But I've ruined you, and the others."

"Each one of us in different ways ... in different timestreams. But the travelers find us useful."

"Why do they take on your features?" Carlos asked

"You force them, you overpower them, you see them as it pleases you. But you are their fuel, and they are gone."

Carlos didn't need to look in Helen's studio where the visitors had gathered. He could feel their absence. "I would have kept them here ... only to keep you."

"You can't keep any of us," Helen said. "I am trapped, as you are."

Carlos tried to follow the visitors. He could regain his strength by sapping theirs ... .

But he was once again much too late.

They had used him and left him bereft, and would return to do so again and again. He turned to Helen. Surely she could help him ... stay with him, but even as he turned to her, his consciousness fragmented into darkness. As memory collapsed, he felt a familiar yearning and grief. He fought the thickening oblivion He railed against it, even as it numbed and anaesthetized and overwhelmed him.

"Helen ... ."

She dissolved like a Cheshire smile, and Carlos had but one last thought. His recurrent revelation and epiphany. Last words.

"This must be Hell ... ."

But without memory, the words sounded almost comforting ... .

THE VISITORS APPEARED IN THE LIGHT STREAMING THROUGH THE HIGH living room windows; they shimmered like the dust motes in the warm amber effluence, then took shape, as so many rainbows after a sun shower in the Catskills; and Carlos rose to stand in the light. He lifted his arms and turned slowly, feeling the warmth on his face and hands, and he imagined that he could feel the life fields of the visitors as they threaded and fluoresced into separate forms, from light and current to the appearance of flesh and viscera ... from the sighing of fabric to the mewling of children rolling on the floor as if spilled from cribs and cradles; and the aching silence of the adult visitors who moved each in his or her own direction, yet seemed like one being ... one mind thinking to itself.

Helen ... . □

Sam Gunn was a space rascal and an intergalactic gambling man. But a murderer? That was what the Interplanetary Tribunal was sworn to find out.

SAM AND THE PRUDENT JURIST

BY BEN BOVA

YOU MIGHT HAVE KNOWN that the very first person to be hauled in to trial by the spanking-new Interplanetary Tribunal would be Sam Gunn. And on trial for his life, at that.

Things might not have been too bad, even so, if it weren't for Sam's old nemesis, the Beryllium Blonde. She wanted Sam's hide tacked onto her office wall. Sam, of course, wanted her body. Anyplace.

And then there was the Toad, as well.

Sam's voice had been the loudest one in the whole solar system against letting lawyers get established off-Earth.

"When it comes to interplanetary jurisprudence," he often said — at the top of his leathery lungs — "what we need is less juris and more prudence!"

But it was inevitable that the Interplanetary Astronautical Authority would set up a

court to enforce its rulings and carry Earth-style legalities out to the edge of the frontier. After all, the asteroid belt was being mined by little guys like Sam and big corporations like Rockledge Industries.

And major consortiums like Diversified Universities & Laboratories, Ltd. (which Sam called DULL) were already pushing the exploration of Jupiter and its many moons.

When the scientists announced the discovery of life on the Jovian moon Europa, of course the environmentalists and theologians and even the Right To Lifers *demanded* that laws — and lawyers — be established in space to protect it.

And Sam wound up on trial. Not just for murder. Genocide.

Me, I was the closest thing to a lawyer in Sam's then-current company, Asteroidal Resources, Inc. Sam had started up and dissolved more corporations than Jupiter has moons, usually making a quick fortune on some audacious scheme and then blowing it on something even wilder. Asteroidal Resources, Inc. was devoted to mining heavy metals from the asteroid belt out beyond Mars, and smelting them down to refined alloys as his factory ships sailed back to the Earth-Moon system.

The company was based on solid economics, provided needed resources to the Earth/Moon system's manufacturers, and was turning a tidy — if not spectacular — profit. For Sam, this was decidedly unusual. Even respectable.

Sam ran a tight company. His ships were highly automated, with bare-bones skeleton crews. There were only six of us in ARI's headquarters in Ceres, the largest of the asteroids. None of us was a real lawyer; Sam wouldn't allow any of them into his firm. My paralegal certificate was as far as Sam was willing to go. He snarled with contempt when other companies began bringing their lawyers into the belt.

And when I said that the office was *in* Ceres, that's exactly what I mean. Even though it's the biggest chunk of rock in the belt, Ceres is only a little over nine hundred kilometers across; barely big enough to be round, instead of an irregular lump, like the other asteroids. No air, hardly any gravity. Mining outfits like Sam's and big-bad Rockledge and others had honeycombed the rock to set up their local headquarters inside it.

My official title was Director, Human Resources. That meant that I was the guy who handled personnel problems, payroll, insurance, health claims, and lawsuits. Sam always had three or four lawsuits pending; he constantly skirted the fringes of legality — which was why he didn't want lawyers in space, of course. He had enough trouble with the Earth-bound variety.

The Beryllium Blonde, by the way, was a corporate lawyer, one of the best, with a mind as sharp and vindictive as her body was lithe and curvaceous. A deadly combination, as far as Sam was concerned.

The entire Human Resources Department in ARI consisted of me and a computer. I had very sophisticated programs to work with, you know, but there was no other human in Human Resources.

Still, I thought things were humming along smoothly enough in our underground offices until the day Sam came streaking back home on a high-gee burn, raced straight from the landing pad to my office without even taking off his flight suit, and announced:

"Orville, you're gonna be my legal counsel at the trial. Start boning up on interplanetary law."

My actual name is Steven. Steven Achernar Wright. But for some reason Sam called me Orville. Sometimes Wilber, but mostly Orville.

"Legal counsel?" I echoed, bounding out of my chair so quickly that I sailed completely over my desk in the low gravity. "Trial? For what? What're you charged with?"

He shook his head. "Murder, I think. Maybe worse."

And he scooted into his office. All I really saw of the little guy was a sawed-off blur of motion topped with rusty-red hair. Huckleberry Finn at Mach 5.

I learned about the charges against Sam almost immediately. My phone screen chimed and the impressive black and silver seal of the International Astronautical Authority appeared on its screen, followed an eyeblink later by a very legal-looking summons and an arrest warrant.

The charges were attempted murder, grand larceny, violation of sixteen — count 'em, sixteen — different IAA environmental regulations and assault & battery with willful intent to cause grievous bodily harm.

Oh yes, and the aforementioned charge of genocide.

All that happened before lunch.

I TAPPED INTO THE BEST LEGAL PROgrams on the sys and, after half a day's reading, arranged to surrender Sam to the IAA authorities at Selene City, on the Moon. He yowled and complained every centimeter of the way. Even when we landed on the Moon, Sam screeched loud enough to set up echoes through Selene City's underground corridors, right up to the headquarters of the IAA.

The IAA chief administrator cheerfully released Sam on his own recognizance. He and Sam were old virtual billiards buddies, and besides, Sam couldn't get away; his name, photo, fingerprints, retinal patterns, and neutron scattering index were posted at every rocket port on the Moon. Sam was stuck on the Moon, at least until his trial.

Maybe longer. The World Government's penal colony was at Farside, where convicts couldn't even see Earth in their sky and they spent their time trying to scrounge helium-three from the regolith, competing with nanomachines that did the job for practically nothing for the big corporations like Masterson and Wankle.

THE TRIAL STARTED PROMPTLY ENOUGH. I begged for more time to prepare a defense, interview witnesses, check the prosecution's published statement of the facts of the case ("And scatter a few bribes around," Sam suggested). No go. The IAA refused any and all requests for a delay in the proceedings. Even their cheerful chief administrator gave me a doleful look and said, "No can do. The trial starts tomorrow, as scheduled."

That worried me. Nobody wanted to appear on Sam's behalf; there were no witnesses to the alleged crimes that weren't already lined up to testify for the prosecution. I couldn't even dig up any character witnesses.

"Testify to Sam's character?" asked one of his oldest friends. "You want them to throw the key away on the little S.O.B? Or maybe you expect me to commit perjury?"

That was the *kindest* response I got.

What worried me even more was the fact that several hundred "neutral observers" had booked passage to the Moon to attend the trial; half of them were environmentalists who thirsted for Sam's blood; the other half were various enemies the little guy had made over his many years of blithely going his own way and telling anybody who didn't like it to stuff his head someplace where the Sun doesn't shine.

The media sensed blood — and *Sam's* blood, at that. He had been great material for them for a long time: the little guy who always thumbed his nose at authority and got away with it. But now Sam had gone too far, and the kindest thing being said about him in the media was that he was "the accused mass-murderer of an entire alien species, the man who wiped out the harmless green lichenoids of Europa."

If all this bothered Sam he gave no indication of it. "The media," he groused. "They love you when you win and they'll use you for toilet paper when you don't."

I studied his round, impish, Jack-o'-Lantern face for a sign of concern. Or remorse. Or even anger at being hauled into court on such

serious charges. Nothing. He just grinned his usual toothy grin and whistled while he worked, maddeningly off-key.

Sam was more worried about the impending collapse of Asteroidal Resources, Inc., than his impending trial. The IAA had frozen all his assets and embargoed all his vehicles. The two factory ships on their way in from the belt were ordered to enter lunar orbit when they arrived at the Earth/Moon system and to stay there; their cargoes were impounded by the IAA, pending the outcome of the trial.

"They want to break me," Sam grumbled. "Whether I win the trial or lose, they want to make sure I'm flat busted by the time it's over."

And then the Toad showed up, closely followed by the Beryllium Blonde.

WE WERE SITTING AT THE DEFENDANT'S table in the courtroom, a very modernistic chamber with a severe, angular banc and witness stand of lunar stone, utterly bare smoothed stone walls, and long benches of lunar aluminum for the spectators. The tables and chairs for the defendant and prosecution were also burnished aluminum, cold and hard. No decorations of any kind; the courtroom was functional, efficient, and gave me the feeling of inhuman relentlessness.

"Kangaroo court," Sam muttered as we took our chairs.

The crowd filed in, murmuring and whispering, and filled the rows behind us. Various clerks appeared. No media reporters or photographers were allowed in the courtroom, but there had been plenty of them out in the corridor, asking simple questions like, "Why did you wipe out those harmless little green lichenoids, Sam?"

Sam grinned at them and replied, "Who says I did?"

"The IAA, DULL, just about everybody in the solar system," came their shouted response.

Sam shrugged good-naturedly. "Nobody's heard my side of it yet."

"You mean you didn't kill them?"

"You claim you're innocent?"

"You're denying the charges against you?"

For once in his life, Sam refused to be baited. All he said was, "That's what this trial is for; to find out who did what to whom. And why."

They were so stunned at Sam's refusal to say anything more that they stopped pestering him and allowed us to go into the courtroom. I was sort of stunned, too. I was used to Sam's nonstop blather on any and every subject under the Sun. Sphinx-like silence was something new, from him.

The courtroom was settling down to a buzzing hum of whispered conversations when the three black-robed judges trooped in to take their seats at the banc. No jury. Sam's fate would be decided by the three of them.

As everybody rose to their feet, Sam looked at the three judges and groaned. "Buddha on iceskates, it's the Toad."

His name was J. Everest Weatherwax, and he was so famous that even I recognized him. Multitrillionaire, captain of industry, statesman, public servant, and philanthropist, Weatherwax was a legend in his own time. He had helped to found DULL and funded unstintingly the universities that joined the consortium. He was on the board of directors of so many corporations that nobody knew the exact number. He was also on the board of governors of the IAA. His power was truly interplanetary in reach, but he had never been known to use that power except for other people's good.

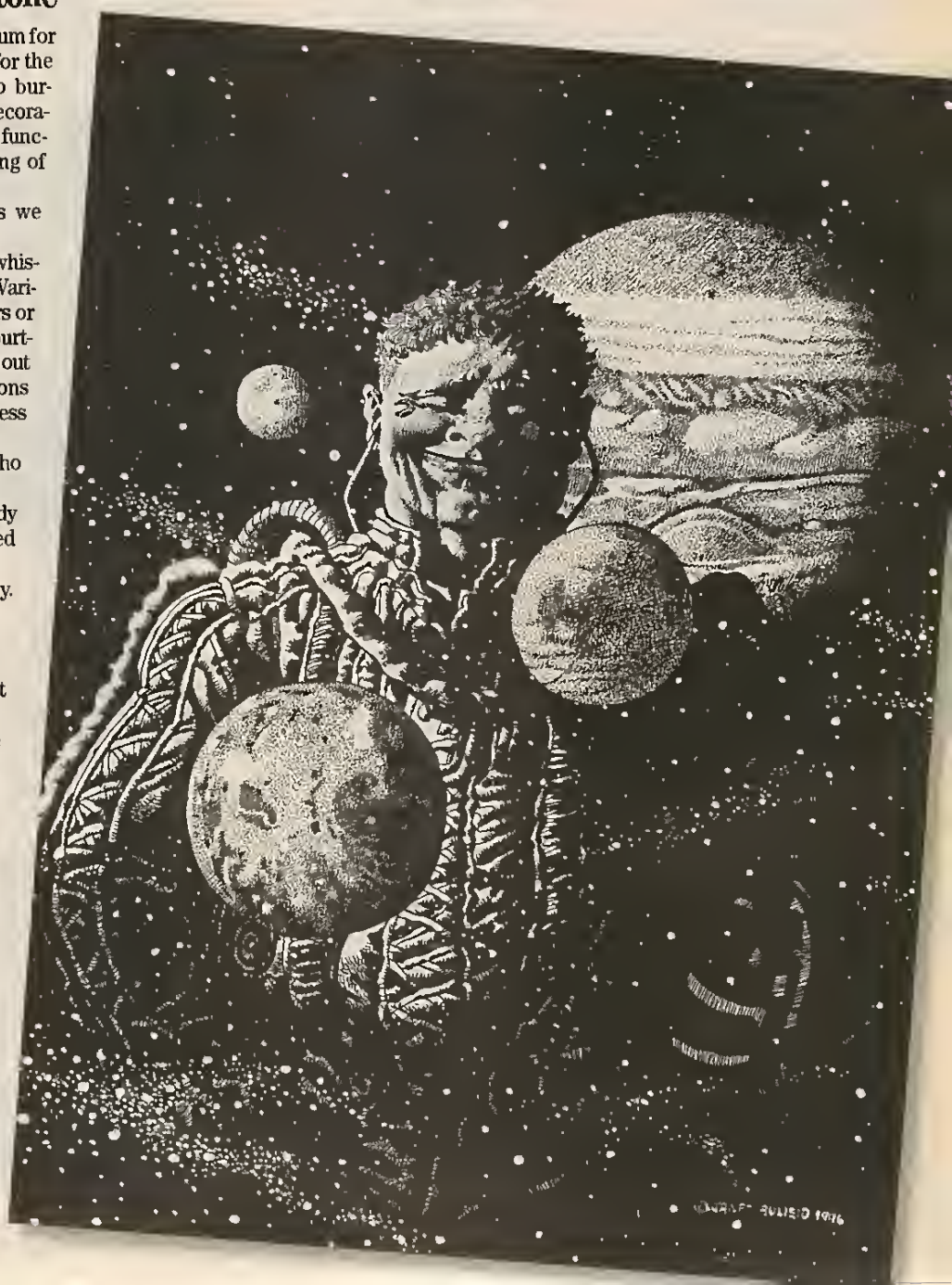
Yet Sam clearly loathed him.

"The Toad?" I whispered to Sam as we sat down and the chief judge — a comely gray-haired woman with steely eyes — began to read the charges against Sam.

"He's a snake," Sam hissed under his breath. "An octopus. He controls people. He *owns* them."

"Mr. Weatherwax?" I was stunned. I had never heard a harsh word said against him before. His good deeds and public unselfishness were known throughout the solar system.

"Just look at him," Sam whispered back, his voice dripping disgust.



I had to admit that Weatherwax did look rather toadlike, sitting up there, looming over us. He was very old, of course, well past the century mark. His face was fleshy, flabby, his skin was gray and splotchy, his shoulders slumped bonelessly beneath his black robe. His eyes bulged and kept blinking slowly; his mouth was a wide almost lipless slash that hung slightly open.

"God help any fly that comes near him," Sam muttered. "Zap! with his tongue."

Weatherwax's money had founded DULL. He had saved the ongoing Martian exploration company when that nonprofit gaggle of scientists had run out of funding. He had originally made his money in biotechnology almost a century ago, then diversified into agribusiness and medicine before getting into space exploration and scientific research in a major way. He had received the Nobel Peace Prize for settling the war between India and Cluna. Rumor had it that if he would only convert to Catholicism, the Pope would make him a saint.

As soon as the chief judge finished reading the charges, Sam shot to his feet.

"I protest," he said. "One of the judges is prejudiced against me."

"Mr. Gunn," said the chief judge, glaring at Sam, "you are represented by legal counsel. If you have any protests to make, they must be made by him."

Sam turned to me and made a nudging move with both hands.

I got to my feet slowly, thinking as fast as I could. "Your honor, my client feels that the panel might be less than unbiased, since one of the judges is a founder of the organization that had brought these charges against the defendant."

Weatherwax just smiled down at us, drooling ever so slightly from the corner of his toadish mouth.

The chief judge closed her eyes briefly, then replied to me, "Justice Weatherwax has been duly appointed by the International Astronautical Authority to serve on this panel. His credentials as a jurist are impeccable."

"Since when is he a judge?" Sam stage-whispered at me.

"The defense was not aware that Mr. Weatherwax had received an appointment to the bench, your honor," I said as diplomatically as I could.

"*Justice* Weatherwax received his appointment last week," she answered frostily, "on the basis of his long and distinguished record of service in international disputes."

"I see," I said meekly. "Thank you, your honor." There was nothing else I could do.

"Settling international disputes," Sam grumbled. "Like the China-India War. Once he stopped selling bioweapons to both sides they had to stop fighting."

"However," the chief judge said, turning to Weatherwax, "if the justice would prefer to withdraw in the face of the defendant's concern..."

Weatherwax stirred and seemed to come to life like a large mound of protoplasm touched by a spark of electricity.

"I assure you, Justice Ostero, that I can judge this case with perfect equanimity." His voice was a deep groan, like the rumble of a distant bullfrog.

The chief justice nodded once, curtly. "So be it," she said. "Let's get on with these proceedings."

It was exactly at that point that the Beryllium Blonde entered the courtroom.

IT WAS AS IF THE ENTIRE COURTROOM STOPPED BREATHING; LIKE THE castle in Sleeping Beauty, everything and everybody seemed to stop in their tracks, just to look at her.

Lunar cities were pretty austere in those days; the big, racy casinos over at Hell Crater hadn't even been started yet. Selene City was the largest of the Moon's communities, but even so it wasn't much more than a few kilometers of rock-walled tunnels. Even the so-called Grand Plaza was just a big open space with a dome sealing it in. Okay, so most of the ground inside the plaza was green with grass and shrubs. After two days, who cared? You could rent wings and go flying on your own muscle power, but there wasn't much in the way of scenery.

The Beryllium Blonde was *scenery*. She stepped into the courtroom and lit up the place, as if her golden hair was casting reflections on the bare stone walls. The panel of three judges — two women and the Toad — just stared at her as she walked demurely down the courtroom's central aisle and stopped at the railing that separated the lawyers and their clients from the spectators.

Sam wound up on trial. Not just for murder. Genocide.

We were all spectators, of course. She was absolutely gorgeous: tall and shapely beyond the dreams of a teen-aged cartoonist. A face that could launch a thousand rockets — among other things.

She looked so sweet, with those wide blue eyes and that perfect face. Her glittery silver suit was actually quite modest, with a high buttoned Chinese collar and trousers that looped beneath her delicate little feet. Of course, the suit was form-fitting. It clung to her as if it'd been sprayed onto her body, and there wasn't a man in the courtroom who didn't envy the fabric.

Even Sam could do nothing more than stare at her, dumfounded. It wasn't until much later that I learned why he called her the Beryllium Blonde. Beryllium: a steel-gray metal, quite brittle at room temperature, with a very high melting point; used mostly as a hardening agent.

How true.

"Am I interrupting?" she asked, in a breathy innocent voice.

The chief judge had to swallow visibly before she found her voice. "No, we were just getting started. What can I do for you?" This from the woman who was known, back in Australia, as the Scourge of Queensland.

"I am here to help represent the prosecution, on a pro bono basis."

All four of the prosecution's expensive lawyers shot to their feet and welcomed her to their midst.

Sam just moaned.

"It goes back a long way," Sam told me after the preliminaries had ended and the court had adjourned for lunch. We had scooted back to the hotel suite we were renting, the two of us desperately trying to hold the company together despite the trial and embargo and everything else.

"She tried to screw me out of my zero-gee hotel, 'way back when,'" he said.

I wondered how literally Sam meant his words. He had the solar system's worst reputation as an insensitive womanizing chauvinist boor. Yet somehow Sam never lacked for female companionship. I've seen ardent feminists succumb to Sam's charm. Once in a while.

"Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned," Sam said, sighing mightily at his memories. "Of course, we spent a pretty intense time together before the doo-doo hit the fan." He sighed again. "All she was after was the rights to my hotel."

"While you were truly and deeply in love," I wisecracked.

Sam looked shocked. "I think I was," he said, sounding hurt. "At least, while it lasted."

"So she has a personal bias against you. Maybe I can get her thrown off the case — "

"Don't you dare!" Sam shrieked, nearly jumping over the coffeetable.

"But — "

He gave me his Huck Finn grin. "If I've got to be raped, pillaged and burnt at the stake," he said happily, "I couldn't think of anybody I'd prefer to have holding the matches."

Had Sam given up?

I DON'T KNOW ABOUT SAM, BUT AFTER the first two days of testimony I was ready to give up.

Fourteen witnesses — a baker's dozen plus one — all solemnly testified that

Sam had deliberately, with malice aforethought and all that stuff, wiped out the harmless lichenoid colony that dwelled under Europa's ice mantle. And had even bashed one of the DULL scientists on the head with an oxygen tank when the man had tried to stop him.

The spectators on the other side of the courtroom rail sobbed and sighed through the testimony, hissed at Sam, and groaned piteously when the last of the witnesses showed a series of computer graphics picturing the little green lichenoids *before* Sam and the empty cavity under the ice where the lichenoids had been but were no longer — *because* of Sam.

"What need have we of further witnesses?" bellowed a heavyset woman from the back of the courtroom.

I turned and saw that she was on her feet, brandishing an old-fashioned rope already knotted into a hangman's noose.

The chief judge frowned at her, rather mildly, and asked her to sit down.

For the first time since his profession of impartiality Weatherwax spoke up. "We want to give the accused a fair trial," he rumbled, again sounding rather like a bullfrog. "Then we'll hang him."

He made a crooked smile to show that he was only joking. Maybe.

The chief judge smiled, too. "Although we haven't yet decided how a sentence of capital punishment would be carried out," she said, looking straight-faced at Sam, "I'm sure it won't be by hanging. In this low-gravity environment that might constitute cruel and unusual punishment."

"Thanks a lot," Sam muttered.

THEN THE CHIEF JUDGE TURNED TO ME. "CROSS EXAMINATION?"

The scientist who had shown the computer graphics was still sitting in the witness chair, to one side of the judges' banc. I didn't have any questions for him. In fact, I wanted him and his cute little pictures off the witness stand as quickly as possible.

But just as I started to shake my head I heard Sam, beside me, speak up.

"I have a few questions for this witness, your honors."

The three judges looked as startled as I felt.

"Mr. Gunn," said the chief judge, with a grim little smile, "I told you before that you are represented by counsel and should avail yourself of his expertise."

Sam glanced at me. We both knew my expertise consisted of a gaggle of computer programs and not much else.

"There are aspects of this case that my, uh...counsel hasn't had time to study. I was on the scene and I know the details better than he possibly could."

The three judges conferred briefly, whispering and nodding. At last the chief judge said, "Very well, Mr. Gunn, you may proceed." Then she smiled coldly and added,

"There is an old tradition in the legal profession that a man who represents himself in court has a fool for a client."

Sam got to his feet, grinning that naughty-little-boy grin of his. "And a fool for a lawyer, too, I guess."

All three judges nodded in unison.

"Anyway," Sam said, jamming his hands into the pockets of his baby-blue coveralls, "there are a couple of things I think the court should know in deeper detail."

I glanced over at the Beryllium Blonde while Sam sauntered up to the witness box. She was sitting back, smiling and relaxed, as if she were enjoying the show. Her four colleagues were watching her, not Sam.

The witness was one of the DULL scientists who'd been on Europa, Dr. Clyde Erskine. He was a youngish fellow, with thinning sandy hair and the beginnings of a pot belly.

Sam gave him his best disarming smile. "Dr. Erskine. Are you a biologist?"

"Uh...no, I'm not."

"A geologist?"

"No." Rather sullenly, I thought.

"What is your professional specialty, then?" Sam asked, as amiably as he might ask a bartender for a drink on the house.

Erskine replied warily. "I'm a professor of communications at the University of Texas. In Austin."

"Not a biologist?"

"No, I am not a biologist."

"Not a geologist or a botanist or zoologist or even a chemist, are you?"

"I am a doctor of communications," Erskine said testily.

"Communications? Like, communicating with alien life forms? SETI, stuff like that?"

"No," Erskine said. "Communications between humans. My specialty is mass media."

Sam put on a look of shocked surprise. "Mass media? You mean you're a public relations flack?"

"I am a doctor of communications!"

"But what you were doing on Europa was generating P.R. material for DULL, wasn't it?"

"Yes," he admitted. "That was my job."

Sam nodded and took a few steps away from the witness, as if he were trying to digest Erskine's admission.

Turning back to the witness chair, Sam asked, "We've heard fourteen witnesses so far. Were any of them biologists?"

Erskine frowned in thought for a moment. "No, I don't believe any of them were."

"Were any of them scientists of any stripe?"

"Most of them were communications specialists," Erskine answered.

"P.R. flacks, like yourself."

"I am not a flack!" Erskine snapped.

"Yeah, sure," said Sam. He hesitated a moment, then asked, "How many people were on Europa?"

"Uh...let me see," Erskine muttered, screwing up his eyes to peer at the stone ceiling. "Must have been upwards of three dozen...no, more like forty, forty-five."

"How many of 'em were scientists?" Sam asked.

"We all were!"

"I mean biologists, geologists — not P.R. flacks."

Erskine's face was getting red. "Communications is a valid scientific field — "

"Sure it is," Sam cut him off. "How many biologists among the forty-five men and women stationed on Europa?"

Erskine frowned in thought for a moment, then mumbled, "I'm not quite certain..."

"Ten?" Sam prompted.

"No."

"More than ten?"

"Uh...no."

"Five?"

Silence.

"More or less?" Sam insisted.

"I think there were three biologists," Erskine muttered, his voice so low that I could hardly hear him.

"Yet none of them have testified at this trial," Sam said, a hint of wonder in his voice. "Why is that, do you think?"

"I don't know," Erskine replied sullenly. "I guess none of them was available."

"Not available." Sam seemed to mull that over for a moment. "Then who prepared all the slides and graphs you and your cohorts have shown at this trial?"

Erskine glanced up at the judges, then answered, "The communications department of the University of Texas."

"At Austin."

"Yes."

"Not the handful of scientists who were on Europa and are now mysteriously not available?"

"The scientists gave us the input for the computer graphics."

"Oh? They were available to help you prepare your presentations but they're not available for this trial? Why is that?"

"I don't know."

Sam turned away from the witness. I thought he was coming back to our table, but suddenly Sam wheeled back to face Erskine again. "Do you have any samples of the Europa lichenoids?"

"Samples? Me? No."

"Do any of the biologists have samples of them? Actual physical samples?"

"No," Erskine said, brows knitting. "They were living under more than seven kilometers of ice. We were — "

"Thank you, Dr. Erskine," Sam snapped. Looking up at the judges he said grandly, "No further questions."

Erskine looked slightly confused, then started to get to his feet.

"Redirect, please," said the Beryllium Blonde.

All three judges smiled down at her. I smiled too as she walked from behind the prosecution's table toward the witness box. Just watching her move was a pleasure. Even Sam gawked at her. Beads of perspiration broke out on his upper lip as he sat down beside me.

"Dr. Erskine," the Blonde asked sweetly, "which scientists helped you to prepare the graphics you showed us?"

Erskine blinked at her as if he were looking at a mirage that was too good to be true. "They were prepared by Dr. Heinrich Fossbinder, of the University of Zurich."

"Dr. Fossbinder is a biologist?"

"Dr. Fossbinder is a Nobel laureate in biology. He was head of the biology team at Europa."

"All three of 'em," Sam stage-whispered loud enough to draw a warning frown from the judges.

The Blonde proceeded, undeterred. "But if you have no samples of the Europa life forms, how were these computer images produced?"

Erskine nodded, as if to compliment her on asking an astute question. "As I said, the lichenoids were living beneath some seven kilometers of ice. We very carefully sank a fiber-optic line down to within a few dozen meters of their level and took the photographs you saw through that fiber-optic link."

With an encouraging smile that dazzled the entire courtroom, the Blonde asked, "Was your team drilling a larger bore hole, in an effort to extract samples of the life forms?"

"Yes, we were."

"And what happened?"

Erskine shot an angry look at Sam. "He ruined it! He came in with his ore-crushing machinery and chewed up so much of the ice that the entire mantle collapsed. Our bore hole was shattered and the lichenoids were exposed to vacuum."

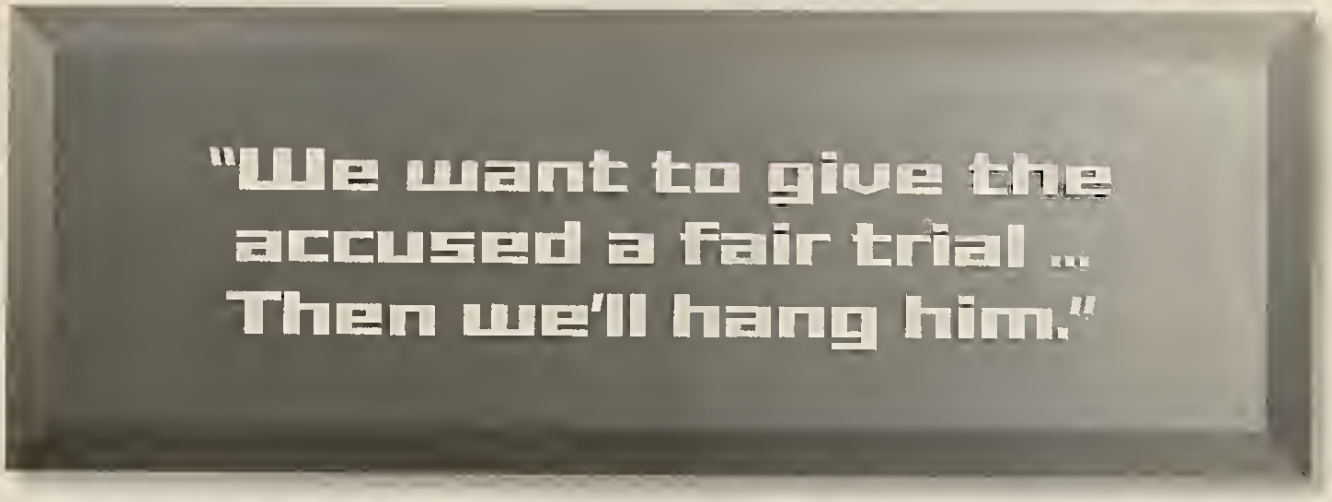
"What effect did that have on the native life forms of Europa?" she asked in a near-whisper.

"It killed them all!" Erskine answered hotly. "Wiped them out!" He pointed a trembling finger at Sam. "He killed a whole world's biosphere!"

The courtroom erupted in angry shouts. I thought the audience was going to lynch Sam then and there.

The Beryllium Blonde smiled at the raging spectators and said, barely loud enough to be heard over their yelling, "The prosecution rests."

The chief judge banged her gavel and recessed for the day, but hardly any of the audience paid her any attention. They wanted Sam's blood. A cordon of security guards formed around us, looking worried. But as we headed for the door, I saw that Sam was unperturbed by any of the riotous goings-on; his eyes were locked on the Blonde. It was as if no one else existed for him.



THE OUTLOOK WASN'T BRILLIANT THAT EVENING. THE PROSECUTION HAD presented what looked like an air-tight case. I had no witnesses except Sam, and in our discussions of the case he hadn't once refuted the prosecution's testimony.

"You really wiped out the colony of lichenoids?" I asked him repeatedly.

His only answer was a shrug and an enigmatic, "They're not there, are they?"

"And you actually banged that scientist on the head with an oxy bottle?"

He grinned at the memory of it. "I sure did," he admitted, impishly.

We were having dinner in our hotel suite. Sam couldn't show his face in a restaurant, that's how much public opinion had turned against him. We had needed six security guards just to walk us from the courtroom to the hotel.

"But he wasn't a scientist," Sam added, heaping broiled scungilli on his plate. Selene's aquaculture produced the best shellfish off-Earth, and the hotel's chef was a Neapolitan master artist.

"He was a science writer for DULL," Sam went on. "Most of the so-called scientists on Europa were public-relations flacks and administrators."

"Like Erskine?"

He nodded. "They weren't doing research. They were busy pumping out media hype about their great green discovery."

"That's neither here nor there, Sam," I said, picking at my own clams posilipo.

"Isn't it?" He made a know-it-all smile.

"Sam, are you keeping something from me?" I asked.

"Me?"

"If you've got some information that will help win this case, some facts, witnesses — anything! We need it now, Sam. I'm supposed to open your defense tomorrow morning and I don't have a thing to go on."

"Except my testimony," he said.

That's what I was afraid of.

YET THE NEXT MORNING I PUT SAM ON the witness chair and asked him one single question:

"Mr. Gunn, can you tell us in your own words what took place on Europa during

the time you were there?"

"Soitinly!" Sam said, grinning.

The judges were not amused. Neither was the Beryllium Blonde, sitting at the prosecution's table, watching Sam intently, her blue eyes focused on him like twin lasers.

THE WHOLE THING STARTED — SAM SAID — WITH THE PARTY TWINS. Cindy and Mindy.

You gotta understand that working those mining ships out there in the asteroid belt is hard, lonely work. Sure, there are women among the crews, but there's always eight or nine more guys than gals on those factory ships, and the guys get — well, the polite word for it is horny.

(The chief judge huffed at that but didn't interrupt. The Toad snorted. The Beryllium Blonde smiled.)

The Party Twins supplied a needed service for the miners. Virtual sex, on demand. Oh sure, there were VR services from Earth/Moon, but the time lag meant that you couldn't do real-time simulations: you had to buy a VR program that was prepackaged. It might have a few variables, but you more-or-less got a regular routine, take it or leave it.

The Party Twins had come out to the belt and established themselves in a spacecraft that could swing around the area and maneuver close enough to the factory ships to do real-time simulations. You know, positive feedback and all that. You could *talk* with 'em, and they'd respond to you. It was great!

Well, anyway, the guys told me it was great. Some of the women used them, too, but that's their business. I never did. Virtual reality is terrific and all that, but I prefer the real thing. I want to feel some warmth instead of grappling with an electronic fantasy.

I saw the twins' advertisements, of course. They were really attractive: two very good-looking dolls who were identical down to their bellybuttons, except that one was right-handed and the other was a lefty. Mindy and Cindy. Geniuses at what they did. They were natural redheads, but with VR they could be any color or shade you wanted.

It was the idea of their being twins that made them so popular. Every guy's got a fantasy about that and they were happy to fulfill your wildest dreams, anything you asked for. And it was all perfectly safe, of course: they were usually a million kilometers away, feeding your fantasy at the speed of light with a real-time virtual reality link.

I had thought about dropping in on them for a real visit, you know, in the flesh. Me and every other guy in the belt. But they stayed buttoned up inside their own spacecraft; no visitors. None of us knew what kind of defenses they might have on their craft, but I guess we all realized that their best defense was the threat of leaving the belt.

So nobody molested them. If anybody gave even a hint that he might try to sneak out to their ship, his fellow miners dissuaded him — as they say — forcefully. Nobody wanted the Twins to leave us alone out in the dark and cold between Mars and Jupiter.

It was sheer coincidence that I happened to be the closest ship to theirs when their life support system malfunctioned. I guess I'm lucky that way, if you can call it lucky when lightning strikes you.

I was trying to repair the mining boat *Clementine* when I heard their distress call. Most mining boats have minimal crews; *Clementine* was the first to be designed to run with no crew at all. Except it didn't work right.

Mining boats attach themselves to an asteroid and grind up the rock or metal, sort it by chemical composition, and store it in their holds until they make rendezvous with a factory boat and unload the ores. *Clementine* was chewing up its target asteroid all right, but there was a glitch in the mass spectrometer and the idiot computer running the boat couldn't figure out which stream of ore should go into which hold, so it stopped all operations halfway into the program and just clung to the asteroid like a scared spider, doing absolutely nothing except costing me money.

So I jetted out to *Clementine* from Ceres in my personal torch ship, leaving the company's important business in the capable and well-trained hands of my crackerjack staff. I figured they could run things for maybe four-five days before driving me into bankruptcy.

So I'm in a battered old hard suit hanging weightless with my head stuck in the computer bay and my feet dangling up near the navigation sensors when the radio bleeps.

"This is *SEX069*," said a sultry female voice. "We have an emergency situation. Our life support system has suffered a malfunction. Our computer indicates we have only eleven point four days until the air recycling scrubbers fail completely. We need help immediately."

I didn't have to look up the IAA registry to find out who *SEX069* was. That's the Party Twins' spacecraft! I pulled my head out of the computer bay, cracking my helmet on the edge of the hatch hard enough to make me see stars, and jack-knifed myself into an upright position by the set of navigation sensors. Not easy to do in a hard suit, by the way.

Being designed to operate uncrewed, *Clementine* didn't have an observation port or even cameras outside its dumb hull. But it had a radio so I squirted off a message to the Twins as fast as my gloved fingers could hit the keypad.

"This is Sam Gunn," I said, in my deepest, manliest voice. "Received your distress call and am on my way to you." Then I couldn't resist adding, "Have no fear, Sam is here!"

I got out of *Clementine* as fast as I could and into my personal torch ship, *Joker*. While I was taking off my hard suit I had the Twins squirt me their location and their computer's diagnostic readings.

Their craft was several million kilometers away, coasting in a Sun-centered orbit not far from the asteroid Vesta.

Now, *Joker*'s built for my comfort — and for speed. Her fusion-MHD drive could accelerate at a full *g* continuously, as long as she had reaction mass to fire out her nozzles. Any other rock jockey in the belt would have had to coast along for weeks on end to reach the Twins. I could zip out to Vesta in a matter of hours, accelerating like a bat out of sheol.

"SPARE US THE PROFANITY, MR. GUNN," SAID THE TOAD.

"And kindly stick to the facts of the case," the chief judge added, frowning. "We don't need a sales pitch for your personal yacht."

Sam shrugged and glanced at me. I realized that if he was trying to drum up interest in *Joker*, he must be feeling pretty desperate, financially.

THE POINT IS — SAM BLITHELY CONTINUED — THAT *JOKER* WAS THE only craft in the belt that had a chance in...in the solar system, of helping the Twins. Nobody else could get to them in eleven days or less.

But as I sat in the bridge, in my form-accommodating, reclinable swivelling command chair, which has built-in massage and heat units (the chief judge glowered at Sam) and looked into the details of the Twins' diagnostics, I realized they were in even deeper trouble than I had thought. The graphs on the screens showed that not only had their recycler failed, they were also losing air; must've been punctured by a centimeter-sized asteroid, punched right through their armor and sprung a leak in their main air tank. Maybe it knocked out their recycling system, too.

Their real problem was with their automated maintenance equipment. How could their system allow the air recycling equipment to go down? And their damned outside robot was supposed to fix punctures as soon as they happened. Theirs didn't. It was just sitting on the outer skin of the hull, frozen into immobility. Maybe an asteroid had dinged it, too. Their diagnostics didn't show why the robot wasn't working.

They needed air, or at least oxygen. And they needed it in a hurry. Even if I got to them in a day or so and fixed the leak and repaired their recycling system they wouldn't have enough air to survive.

I spent the next few hours chewing on their problem. Or really, getting the best computers I could reach to chew on it. *Joker* has some really sophisticated programs in its access (the chief judge scowled again) but I also contacted my headquarters on Ceres and even requested time on the IAA system. I had to come up with a solution that would work. And fast.

By the time I had showered, put on a fresh set of coveralls, and taken a bite of food, the various analyzes started showing up on the multiple display screens in *Joker*'s very comfortable yet efficiently laid-out bridge. ("Mr. Gunn!" all three judges yelped.)

Okay, so here's the situation. The Twins' air is leaking out through the puncture. I can fix the puncture in ten minutes, while their dumb robot sits on its transistors and does nothing, but they'll still run out of air in a couple of days. I can give them oxygen from *Joker*'s water tanks — electrolyze the water, that's simple enough. But then I won't have enough reaction mass to get away and we'll both be in trouble.

Now, I've got to admit, the thought of being marooned off Vesta with the Party Twins had a certain appeal to it. But when I thought it over, I figured that although being with them could be great fun, *dying* with them wasn't what I wanted to do.

Besides, they flatly refused to even consider letting me inside their leaking craft.

"Oh, no, Mr. Gunn!" they said, in unison. "We could never allow you to board our ship."

Cindy and Mindy were on my main display screen, two lovely redheads with sculpted cheekbones and emerald-green eyes and lips just trembling with emotion.

"That wouldn't be right," said Cindy. Or maybe it was Mindy.

"We've never let anyone into our ship," said the other one.

"If we let you, then all the other miners would want to visit us, too."

"In person!"

"In the flesh."

"But this would be a mission of mercy," I pleaded.

They blushed and lowered their eyes. Beautiful long silky lashes, I noticed.

"Mr. Gunn," said Mindy. Or maybe Cindy. "How would you feel if we allowed one of your miners to board our vessel?"

"You'd want the same privilege, wouldn't you?" the other one asked.

"I sure would," I admitted, feeling deflated and erect at the same time.

"For your information," said Cindy (Mindy?), "we've received calls from seventeen other mining ships, responding to our distress message."

"They're all on their way to us."

"And they all will want to come aboard once they reach us."

"Which we won't allow, of course."

"Of course," I said, downcast. "How soon can they reach you?"

"Not for several weeks, at least."

"We've informed them all that there's no sense in their coming to us, since they can't reach us in time."

"But they've all replied that they'll come anyway."

I wondered who the hell was doing any mining. The Twins could cause a financial collapse of the metals and minerals market, at this rate.

"MR. GUNN," SAID THE CHIEF JUDGE SHARPLY, "WILL YOU PLEASE STICK to the facts pertaining to this case? We have no prurient interest in your sexual fantasies."

"Or your financial problems," added the Toad.

"But you've gotta understand the situation," Sam insisted. "Unless you can see how the distances and timing were, you won't be able to grasp the reasons for my actions."

The chief judge heaved a long, impatient sigh. "Get on with it, Mr. Gunn," she groused.

OKAY, OKAY. WHERE WAS I...OH, YEAH.

I didn't believe the computer analyzes when I first saw them. But each system came up with the same set of alternatives and the only one that had any chance of helping the Twins was the one I took.

It looked crazy to me, at first. But the computers had taken into account *Joker*'s high-thrust capability; that was they key to their solution.

All I had to do was zip out to Jupiter at three *g*'s acceleration, grab some oxygen from one of the ice-covered Galilean moons, refuel *Joker*'s fusion generator by scooping hydrogen and helium isotopes from Jupiter's upper atmosphere, and then roar back to the belt at another three *g*'s and deliver the oxygen to the Twins.

Simple.

Also impossible.

So that's what I did.

"MAY I INTERRUPT?" ASKED THE BERYLlium Blonde, rising to her feet behind the prosecution's table.

All three judges looked happy to accommodate her. Or maybe they were just getting tired of listening to Sam. His voice had a kind of nervous edge to it; after a while it was like listening to a mosquito whining in your ear.

"Mr. Gunn," she said, smiling ingenuously at Sam, in the witness box, "you told this court that you consulted several computer analyzes before deciding on your course of action?"

"That's right," San replied, grinning goofily at her. He seemed overjoyed that she was talking to him.

"And did each of these computer analyzes specifically direct you to the Jovian moon Europa?"

Sam shifted a little on the chair. "No, they didn't. They all showed that Ganymede would be my best bet."

"Then why did you go to Europa?"

"I was coming to that when you interrupted me."

"Isn't it true, Mr. Gunn, that your entire so-called 'mission of mercy' was actually a clever plot to break the embargo on commercial exploitation of the Jupiter system?"

That's where Sam should have said a simple and emphatic *no!* and let it go at that. But not Sam.

Apparently some things were more important to Sam even than women. He lost his goofy expression and stared straight into her china-blue eyes.

"The IAA's embargo on the commercial development of the Jupiter system is a shuck," Sam said evenly.

A general gasp arose. Even the judges — especially the judges — seemed shocked. For the first time since the trial had begun, the Toad looked angry.

Undeterred, Sam went on, "Why embargo commercial enterprises

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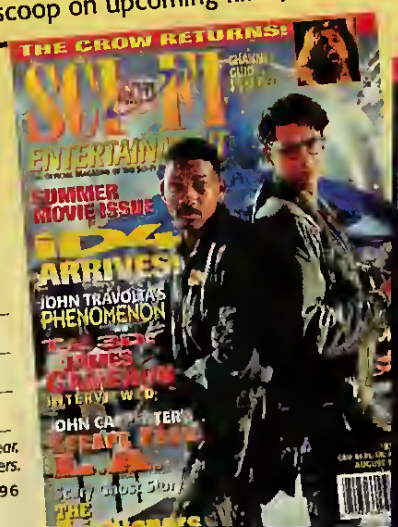
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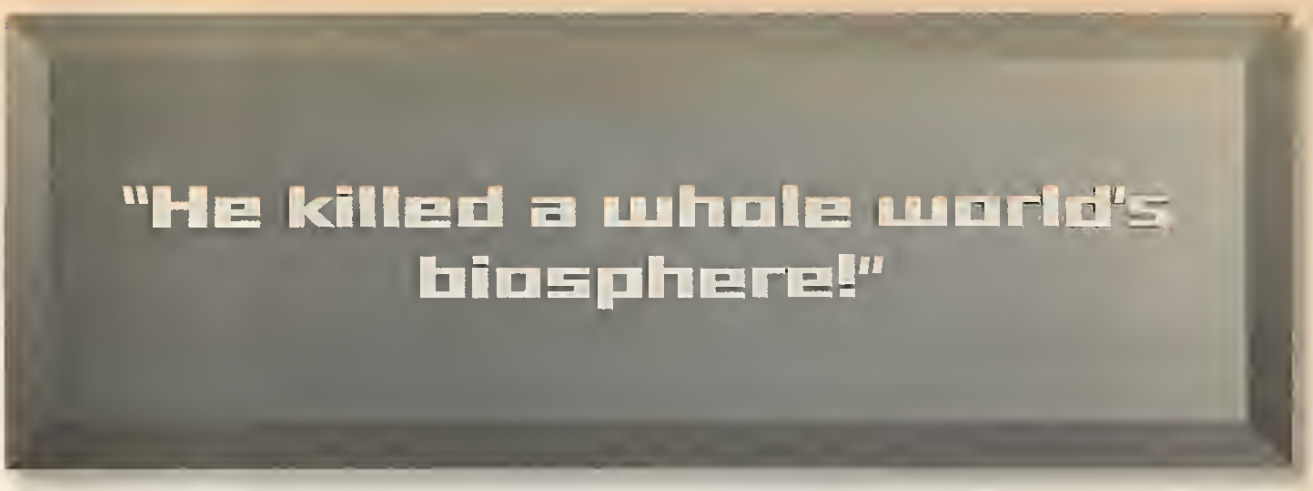
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from the entire Jupiter system? What's the sense of it? Even if you want to protect those little green things on Europa, just putting Europa off-limits would be good enough. Why close off the whole system?"

"Why indeed," the Blonde countered, "now that you've killed off those poor little green creatures."

"Would you rather let two human women die?" Sam demanded.

"Two prostitutes?"

"Look who's talking."

The chief judge whacked her gavel so hard its head flew off, nearly beaning the clerk sitting at the foot of the banc.

But before the judge could say anything, Sam exclaimed, "One of the issues at stake here is the moral question of human life versus animal rights."

A rail-thin, bald and bleary-eyed man shot to his feet from the middle of the spectators. "Animals have legal rights! A dog or a cat has just as much right to life and dignity as a human being!"

"Yeah," Sam retorted, "unless the human being's life is in danger. If I'm a fireman rushing into a burning building, who am I gonna grab first, a human baby or a puppy dog?"

"Stop this!" the chief judge bellowed, slapping the top of the banc with the flat of her hand. "I will have order in this courtroom or I'll clear the chamber!"

The gaunt animal-rights man sat down, muttering to himself.

"And you, Mr. Gunn," said the chief judge, scowling down at Sam, "will not turn this trial into a circus. Stick to the facts of the case!"

"One of the 'facts' of this case," Sam replied evenly, "is the accusation that I wiped out an entire alien life form. Even if that's true — and I'm not admitting it is — I did what I did to save the lives of two human woman."

He turned back to the Blonde. "And they're not prostitutes; they're producers of virtual reality simulations. Which is more than I can say for some of the broads in this courtroom!"

"Your honors!" the Blonde cried, her hands flying to her face. But I was close enough to see that her cheeks weren't blushing and there was pure murder in those deep blue eyes.

The chief judge threw her hands in the air. "Mr. Gunn, if you cannot or will not restrict your testimony to the facts of this case, we will hold you in contempt of court."

For just an instant the expression on Sam's face told me that he was considering a term in the penal colony as better than certain bankruptcy. But the moment passed.

"Okay," he said, putting on his most contrite little boy face. "I'll stick to the facts — if I'm not interrupted."

The Blonde huffed and stamped back to the prosecution table.

AS I SAID, THE COMPUTER ANALYZES SHOWED THAT I HAD TO ZOOM OUT to the Jupiter system at three *g*'s, grab some oxygen from Ganymede, restock my fusion fuel and reaction mass by scooping Jupiter's atmosphere, and then race back to the Twins — again at three *g*'s. Three point oh two, to be exact.

It was trickier than walking a tightrope over Niagara Falls on your hands, blindfolded; more convoluted than a team of Chinese acrobats auditioning for the Beijing Follies; as dangerous as —

("Mr. Gunn, please!" wailed the chief judge.)

Well, anyway, it was going to be a female dog and a half. Riding for several days at a time in three *g*'s is no fun; you can't really move when every part of your body weighs three times normal. A hiccup can give you a hernia. If you're not *extremely* careful you could end up with your scrotum hanging down to your ankles. I always wear a lead jockstrap, of course, but even so...

(I thought the judges were about to have apoplexy, but Sam kept going without even taking a breath, so by the time they were ready to yell at him he was already miles away, subject-wise.)

I cranked my reclining command chair all the way down so it could work as an acceleration couch. I couldn't take the chance of trying to raise my head and chew solid food and swallow while under three *g*'s, so while the acceleration was building up I set up an intravenous feeding system for myself from *Joker*'s medical systems. The ship has the best medical equipment this side of Lunar University, by the way. That was pretty easy. The tough part was sticking the needle into my own arm and inserting the intravenous feed.

(Half the courtroom groaned at the thought.)

And then there was the waste elimination tubing, but I won't go into that.

(More groans and a couple of gargling, retching sounds.)

I welded the computer keyboard to the end of my command chair's right armrest even though the computer was fully-equipped with voice recognition circuitry. Didn't want to take any chances on the system — as ultra-sophisticated as it is — failing to recognize my voice because I was strangling in three *g*'s.

By the time *Joker*'s acceleration passed two *g*'s I was flat on my back in the couch, all the necessary tubes in place, display screens showing me the ongoing analyzes of this crazy mission. I had to get everything right, down to the last detail, or end up burning myself to a crisp in Jupiter's atmosphere or nosediving into Ganymede and making a new crater in the ice.

"YOU KEEP SAYING GANYMEDE," THE Toad demanded. "How did you end up at Europa?"

"I'm coming to that, oh saintly one," Sam replied.

I HAD TO DRAG *CLEMENTINE* ALONG WITH ME, BECAUSE I WAS GOING TO need the ores she'd managed to store in her holds before her super-duper computer fritzed. Those chunks of metal were going to be my

heat shield when I skimmed Jupiter's upper atmosphere. I just hoped there was enough of 'em to make a workable heat shield.

The way the numbers worked out, I would accelerate almost all the way to the Jupiter system, then flip around and start decelerating. I'd still be doing better than two *g*'s when I hit Jupiter's upper atmosphere. Even though the gases are pretty thin at that high altitude, I needed a heat shield if I didn't want *Joker* to get barbecued, with me inside her.

So even though I was flat on my back and not able to move much more than my fingers and toes, I had plenty of work to do. I couldn't trust *Clementine*'s smartass computer to handle the heat shield job; her computer was too glottle-stop sophisticated for such a menial job. I had to manually direct the manipulators to pull chunks of ore from her holds and place them up ahead of *Joker* by a few meters, all the time lying on the flat of my back, spending most of my energy just trying to breathe.

Believe me, breathing in three *g*'s is not fun, even when you're on a padded couch. The *g* force is running from your breastbone to your spine, so every time you try to expand your lungs to take in some air, you've got to push your ribs against three times their normal weight. It's like having an asthma attack that never goes away. I was exhausted before the first day was over.

It would've been better if I could've just pumped some sedatives through the IV in my arm and slept my way to Jupiter. But I had to build up the heat shield or I'd be fricasseed when I hit Jupiter's atmosphere. I tapped into the best re-entry programs on Earth as I put together those chunks of metal. They had to be close enough to one another so that the shock waves from the heated gases would cancel one another out before they got through the spaces between chunks and heated up *Joker*.

"YOU DID THIS WHILE ON THE WAY TO JUPITER?" ASKED THE OTHER woman judge. "While accelerating at three gravities?"

Sam put his right hand over his heart. "I did indeed," he said.

The woman shook her head, whether in admiration or disbelief I couldn't figure out.

"A question, please?" asked the Beryllium Blonde from her seat at the prosecution table.

For the first time, the chief judge looked just a trifle annoyed. "There will be ample time for cross-examination, counselor."

"I merely wanted to ask if Mr. Gunn was aware of the embargo on unauthorized flights into the Jovian system imposed by the Interplanetary Astronautical Authority."

AWARE OF IT? — SAM REPLIED — I SURE WAS. I SENT OUT A MESSAGE to the research station on Europa to tell 'em I was entering the Jupiter system on a mission of mercy. I set my comm unit to continue sending the message until it was acknowledged. They ignored it for a day and a half, and then finally sent a shi — an excrement-load of legalese garbage that took my computer twenty minutes to translate into understandable English.

("And what was the message from Europa?" the chief judge asked.)

Boiled down to, "Keep out! We don't care who you are or why you're heading this way, just turn around and go back to where you came from."

I got on the horn and tried to explain to them that I was trying to save the lives of two women and I wouldn't disturb them on Europa, but they just kept beaming their legal ka-ka. Either they didn't believe me or they didn't give a hoot about human lives.

Well, I couldn't turn around even if I'd wanted to. My flight profile depended on using Jupiter's atmosphere to aerobrake *Joker*, swing around the planet, and make a slowed approach to Ganymede. So I programmed my comm unit to keep repeating my message to Europa. It was really pretty: we're both hollering at each other and paying no attention to what the other guy's hollering back. Like two drivers in Boston yelling at each other over a fender-bender.

But while I'm roaring down toward Jupiter I start wondering: why does DULL need the whole Jupiter system roped off, when all they're supposed to be studying is Europa? I mean, they looked at Jupiter's other Galilean moons and didn't find diddly-poo. And if there's any life on Jupiter it's buried so deep inside those clouds that we haven't been able to find it.

I had to get everything right, or end up burning myself to a crisp ...

Why embargo the whole Jupiter system when all they're supposed to be studying is Europa?

The question nagged at me like a toothache. Even while I was putting my makeshift heat shield together, I kept wondering about it in the back of my mind. I kept mulling it over, using the question to keep me from thinking about how much my chest hurt and wondering about how many breaths I had left before my ribs collapsed.

Once the heat shield was in place — or as good as a ramshackle collection of rocks can be — I could devote my full attention to the question. Mine, and the computer's.

One thing I've learned over the years of being in business: when you're trying to scope out another company's moves, follow the money trail. So I started sniffing out the financial details of Diversified Universities & Laboratories, Ltd. It wasn't all that easy; DULL is a tax-exempt, non-profit organization; it isn't publicly owned and its finances are not on public record.

But even scientists like to see their names in the media, and corporate bigwigs like it even more. So I started scrolling through the media stories about the discovery of life forms on Europa and DULL's organization of a research station on the Jovian moon.

I learned two very interesting things.

The cost of setting up the research operation on Europa was funded by Wankle Enterprises, Incorporated, of New York, London and Shanghai.

It was Wankle's lawyers — including a certain gorgeous blonde — who talked the IAA into placing the whole Jupiter system, planet,

moons, all of it, under embargo. No commercial development allowed. No unauthorized missions permitted.

Make that three things that I learned: The IAA's embargo order has some fine print in it. DULL is allowed to permit "limited resource extraction" from the Jupiter system as a means of funding its ongoing research activities on Europa. And guess who got permission from DULL to start "limited resource extraction" from Jupiter and its moons? Wankle Enterprises, Inc.

Who else?

THE SPECTATORS STIRRED AND MUTTERED. The judges were staring at Sam with real interest now, as if he'd suddenly turned into a different species of witness. All five of the prosecution attorneys — including the Beryllium Blonde — were on their feet, making objections.

"Irrelevant and immaterial," said the first attorney.

"Rumor and hearsay," said number two.

"Wankle Enterprises is not on trial here," said number three, "Sam Gunn is."

"He's trying to smear Diversified Universities and Laboratories, Limited," number four bleated.

The Blonde said, "I object, your honors."

The chief judge raised an eyebrow half a millimeter. "On what grounds, counselor?"

"Mr. Gunn's statements are irrelevant, immaterial, based on rumor and hearsay, an attempt to shift the focus of this trial away from himself and onto Wankle Enterprises, and a despicable attempt to smear the good name of an organization dedicated to the finest and noblest scientific research."

The chief judge nodded, then glanced briefly at her colleagues on either side. They both nodded, much more vigorously.

"Very well," she said. "Objection sustained. Mr. Gunn's last statement will be stricken from the record."

Sam shrugged philosophically. "None of those three facts can stay on the record?"

"None."

"I found out something else, too," Sam said to the judges. "A fourth fact about DULL."

"Unless it is strictly and necessarily relevant to this case," said the chief judge sternly, "it will not be allowed as testimony."

Sam thought it over for a moment, an enigmatic smile on his Jack-o'-Lantern face. Then, with a shake of his head that seemed to indicate disappointment but not defeat, Sam returned to his testimony.

OKAY, I'LL SAVE THE FOURTH FACT FOR A WHILE AND THEN WE'LL SEE IF it's relevant or not.

Where was I — oh, yeah, I'm dropping into Jupiter's gas clouds at a little under three g's, the insides of my chest feeling like somebody's been sandpapering them for the past few days.

I put in a call to the Twins, telling them to hang in there, I'd be back with all the oxygen they needed in less than a week. I didn't tell them how awful I felt, but they must have seen it in my face.

It took about eleven minutes for my comm signal to reach them, and another eleven for their answer to get back to me. So I gave them a brave "Don't give up the ship" spiel and then went about my business checking out my heat shield — and DULL's finances.

Cindy and Mindy both appeared on my comm screen, wearing less than Samoan nudists at the springtime fertility rites. If my eyeballs hadn't weighed a little more than three times normal they would've popped right out of their sockets.

"We truly appreciate what you're doing for us, Sam," they said in unison, as if they'd rehearsed it. "And we want you to know that we'll be *especially* appreciative when you come back to us."

"Extremely appreciative," breathed Cindy. Mindy?

"Extraordinarily appreciative," the other one added, batting her long lashes at me.

I was ready to jump off my couch and fly to them like Superman. Except that the damned *g*-load kept me pinned flat. All of me.

Everything would've worked out fine — or at least okay — if my swing through Jupiter's upper atmosphere had gone as planned. But it didn't.

Ever see an egg dropped from the top of a ninety-story tower hit the pavement? That's what *Joker* was doing, just about: dropping into Jupiter's atmosphere like a kamikaze bullet. I had to use the planet's atmosphere to slow down my ship while at the same time I scooped enough Jovian hydrogen and helium isotopes to fill my propellant tanks. With that makeshift heat shield of rocks flying formation in front of *Joker* all the while.

Things started going wrong right away. The heat shield heated up too much and too soon. *Joker*'s skin temperature started rising really fast. One by one my outside cameras started to conk out; their circuitry was being fricasseed by white-hot shock-heated gases. Felt like I was melting, too, inside the ship despite the bridge's absolutely first-rate climate control system.

The damned heat shield started breaking up, which was something my hotshot computer programs didn't foresee. I should've thought of it myself, I guess. Stands to reason. Each individual rock in that jury-rigged wall in front of me was blazing like a meteor, ablating away, melting like the Wicked Witch of the West when you throw water on her.

(The chief judge frowned, puzzled, at Sam's reference, but Weatherwax gave a toad-like smile and even nodded.)

I would've peeled down to my skivvies if I'd been able to, but I was still plastered into my reclined command chair like a prisoner chained to a torture rack. Must've lost twenty pounds sweating. Came as close to praying as I ever did, right there, zooming through Jupiter's upper atmosphere.

The camera on *Joker*'s ass end was still working, and while I sweated and almost prayed, I watched Jupiter's swirling clouds whizzing by, far, far below me. Beautiful, really, all those bands of colors and the way they curled and eddied along their edges, kinda like the way —

("Spare us the travelogue," said the Toad, his bulging eyes blinking with displeasure. The chief judge added, "Yes, Mr. Gunn. Get on with it.")

Well, okay. So I finally pull out of Jupiter's atmosphere with my propellant tanks full and *Joker*'s skin still intact — barely. But the aerobraking hadn't followed the computer's predicted flight path as closely as I'd thought it would. Wasn't off by much, but as I checked out my velocity and position I saw pretty damned quickly that I wasn't going to be able to reach Ganymede.

Joker had slowed to less than one *g*, all right, and other than the failed cameras and a few strained seams in the skin the ship was okay. I could sit up and even walk around the bridge, if I wanted to. I even disconnected all the tubing that was hooked into me. Felt great to be free and able to take a leak on my own again.

But Ganymede was out of reach.

Now the whole reason for this crazy excursion was to grab oxygen to replenish the Party Twins' evaporating supply. I checked through the computer and saw that the only ice-bearing body I could reasonably get to was — you guessed it — good ol' Europa.

"MR. GUNN," THE TOAD INTERRUPTED, HIS VOICE A MELANCHOLY CROAK, "do you honestly expect this court to believe that after all your derring-do, Europa was the only possible body that you could reach?"

Sam gave him his most innocent look. "I'm under oath, right? How can I lie to you?"

The chief judge opened her mouth as if she were going to zing Sam, then she seemed to think better of it and said nothing.

"Besides," Sam added impishly, "you can check *Joker*'s computer logs, if you haven't already done that."

The Beryllium Blonde called from the prosecution table, "A point of information, please?"

All three judges smiled and nodded.

Without rising, the Blonde asked, "There are twenty-seven moons in the Jupiter system, are there not?"

"Twenty-nine," Sam snapped, "including the two little sheep dog rocks that keep Jupiter's ring in place."

"Aren't most of these moons composed of ices that contain a goodly amount of oxygen?"

"Yes they are," Sam replied before anyone else could, as politely as if he were speaking to a stranger.

"Then why couldn't you have obtained the oxygen you claim you needed from one of those other satellites?"

"Because, oh fairest of the sadly mushbrained profession of hired truth-twisters, my poor battered little ship couldn't reach any of those other moons."

"Truly?"

Sam put his right hand over his heart. "Absolutely. *Joker* was like a dart thrown at a dartboard. I had aimed for a bull's eye, but the aerobraking flight had jiggled my aim and now I was headed for Europa. Scout's honor. It wasn't my idea. Blame Isaac Newton, or maybe Einstein."

The Blonde said nothing more, but it was perfectly clear from the expression on her gorgeous face that she didn't believe a word Sam was saying. I looked up at the judges — it took an effort to turn my eyes away from the Blonde — and saw that none of the three of them believed Sam either. Mentally I added the possibility of perjury charges to the list Sam already faced.

IT WASN'T MY IDEA TO HIT EUROPA — Sam insisted — but there wasn't much else I could do. Sure, I had my tanks full of propellant for the fusion torch, but I was gonna need that hydrogen and helium for the high-*g* burn back to Vesta and the Twins. I couldn't afford to spend any of it juking around the Jupiter system. I was pointed at Europa when I came out of Jupiter's atmosphere. Act of god, you could call it.

(I couldn't fail to notice the grin that crept across Sam's face as he spoke. Neither could the judges. Either he was not telling it exactly the way it had happened or he was downright pleased that this "act of god" had pointed him squarely at Europa.)

I called the DULLards on Europa again and gave them a complete rundown of the situation. Recorded my message and had the comm system keep replaying it to 'em. They didn't respond. Not a peep.

I had nothing to do for several hours except feel good that I didn't have all those damned tubes poking into me. But even though I could get up and walk around my luxuriously-appointed bridge and take solid food from my highly-automated and well-stocked galley, my brain kept nibbling at a question that'd been nagging at me since before I hit Jupiter.

Why did DULL insist on keeping the whole Jupiter system off-limits to outside developers?

And why did the IAA agree to let them do that?

All of a sudden my comm system erupted with noise from Europa. They started screaming at me that I wasn't allowed in the Jupiter system, I can't land on Europa, I'd better haul ass out of there, yaddida, yaddida, and so on. Threatened me with lawsuits and public flogging and whatnot.

I told them I was on a mission of mercy and two human lives depended on my grabbing some of their ice. Three lives, come to think of it. My butt was on the line, too.

But even if they heard me they didn't listen. They just kept screaming that I wasn't allowed to land on Europa or be anywhere in the Jupiter system. Different faces appeared on my comm screen every fifteen seconds, seemed like, all of them getting more and more frantic as I came hurtling closer to Europa's ice-covered surface.

"I hear what you're saying," I told them. "I'm not going to disturb your little green lichenoids. I just need to grab some ice and, believe me, I'll be out of your way as fast as a jackrabbit in mating season."

I might as well have been talking to myself. In fact, I think I was. They paid no attention to what I was saying.

A really nasty-looking lug came on my comm screen. "This is Captain Majerkurth. I'm in charge of security here on Europa. If you try to land here I will personally break your balls."

"Security?" I blurted. "What do you need security for? And what army are you a captain in?"

"I am a captain in the security department of Wankle Enterprises, on loan to Diversified Universities and Laboratories, Limited," he replied evenly — an even snarl, that is.

"Well, if I were you, *mon capitain*," I said, "I'd start getting my people under shelter. My spacecraft is accompanied by about a hundred or so rocks that're going to hit Europa like a meteor shower."

That was the remains of my heat shield, of course. Most of the rocks had ablated down to pebble size, but at the velocity we were travelling they could still do some damage. Europa's icy surface was going to get peppered and there wasn't anything I could do about it except warn them to get under shelter.

Well, to make a long story short (the judges all sighed at that) I landed on Europa nice and smooth, a real gentle touchdown. With *Clementine* still dragging along beside me, of course. The meteor shower I promised Capt. Majerkurth didn't harm anything, near as I can tell: just a few hundred new little craterlets in Europa's surface of ice.

So I've got *Clementine* chewing up ice and storing it in her holds. Bypassed her dumbass mass spectrometer, otherwise her computer would've stopped everything because it couldn't figure out what elements were going into which bins. Didn't matter. It was all ice, which added up to hydrogen for *Joker*'s fusion torch and oxygen for the Twins.

I expected Majerkurth to show up and, sure enough, I hadn't been sitting on Europa for more than an hour before this flimsy little hopper pops up over my horizon, heading my way on a ballistic trajectory. For half a second I thought the hardass had fired a missile at me, but my computer analyzed the radar data in picoseconds and announced that it was a personnel hopper, not a missile, and it was gonna land beside *Joker*.

I buttoned up *Joker* good and tight. I had no intention of letting Majerkurth come aboard. But the spacesuited figure that climbed down from the hopper wasn't the security captain.

"Mr. Gunn, this is Anitra O'Toole. Permission to come aboard?"

I stared at the image in my display screen. You can't tell much about a person when she's zipped into a spacesuit, but Anitra O'Toole looked small — maybe my own height or even a little less — and her voice was kind of...well, she sounded almost scared.

"Are you one of Majerkurth's security people?" I asked.

"Security? Goodness no! If Captain Majerkurth knew I was here he'd..." She hesitated, then pleaded, "Please let me come aboard, Mr. Gunn. Please!"

What could I do? I could never refuse a woman asking for help, and she seemed to need my help pretty desperately. It was like the time I —

("Please stick to the facts of this case!" the chief judge demanded.)

Yeah, okay. So I let her in. Anitra O'Toole turned out to be young, kinda pretty in a cheerleader way, and very worried. Oh, and she was one of the three biologists among the DULL team on Europa.

And she was scared, too. She wouldn't say why, at first, or why she wanted to come aboard *Joker*. She just fidgeted and blathered about her husband waiting for her back on Earth and how she was afraid that her marriage was coming apart because they'd been separated so long and her career might be going down the tubes as well.

I only had a few hours to be on Europa, but while my brain-dead *Clementine* was ingesting ice I tried to be as hospitable as possible. I sat Anitra down in my quarters, just off the bridge, and programmed the galley to produce a gourmet dinner of roast squab, sweet potatoes, string beans —

("Mr. Gunn!" growled the Toad.)

All right, all right. I popped a bottle of champagne for her. *Joker* has the best wine cellar in space, bar none.

Now, don't get me wrong. I don't try to seduce married women, even when they tell me their marriage is in trouble. Especially then, as a matter of fact. Too complicated; too many chances for lawsuits or grievous bodily harm.

I was more interested in her saying that her career might be going down the tubes. One of three biologists on Europa, working on a newly-discovered form of extraterrestrial life, and her career was in trouble?

"Why?" I asked her.

Anitra had these big violet eyes and the kind of golden blonde hair that most women get out of a bottle. Sitting there beside me in a one-piece zipsuit, she looked young and unhappy and vulnerable, like a runaway waif. I stayed an arm's length away; it wasn't easy, but I kept thinking about the Twins as much as I could.

"The adaptation isn't working," Anitra said, miserable. "All this planning and genetic engineering and they still won't reproduce."

"What won't reproduce?" I asked.

She sipped at the champagne. I refilled her glass.

"Could you take me back to Earth?" she blurted.

I started to say no, which was the truth. But long, long ago I had learned that the truth doesn't always get the job done.

"I'm heading back to the belt. My company headquarters is in Ceres," I said. "I could arrange transportation from there."

She clutched at my wrist, nearly spilling my champagne. "Would you?"

"Why do you want to leave Europa so badly?"

Those violet eyes looked away from me. "My husband," she said vaguely.

"Won't DULL set you up with transportation? They have regular resupply flights, don't they? You could hook a ride back Earthside with them."

"No," she said, barely a whisper. "I've got to go now, while I've got the chance. And the nerve."

"But your work here on the lichenoids..."

"That's the whole point!" she burst. "It isn't working and everybody's going to find out and I'm going to be ruined professionally and nobody will want me, not even Brandon."

I figured Brandon was her husband.

("Is there a point to all this?" asked the chief judge, frowning.)

The point is this. Anitra O'Toole told me that the lichenoids DULL was studying are not native to Europa. They were engineered in a biology lab in Zurich and planted on Europa by the DULL team.

One thing I've learned over the years — follow the money trail.

THE COURTROOM ERUPTED. AS IF A BOMB HAD GONE OFF. HALF THE spectators jumped to their feet, shouting. The Beryllium Blonde and her four cohorts were screaming objections. The chief judge was banging the stump of her gavel on the banc, demanding order.

But what caught my eye was the look on the splotchy face of the Toad. Weatherwax was staring at Sam as if he would have gladly strangled him, if he'd had the chance.

It took a while and a lot of whacking of the stump of her gavel, but once order was restored to the courtroom, the chief judge fixed Sam with a beady eye and asked, "Are you maintaining, Mr. Gunn, that there never were indigenous life forms on Europa?"

Sitting in the witness chair with his hands folded childlike on his lap, Sam replied courteously, "Yes, ma'am, that's exactly what I'm saying. The whole story was a subterfuge, engineered by the people who run DULL."

"This is outrageous!" Weatherwax roared. Everyone in the courtroom realized that he was *the* man who ran DULL.

The chief judge was a little more professional. She turned to the prosecution's lawyers, who were still standing and fuming.

"Cross examination?"

The Beryllium Blonde stalked out from behind the table like a battle cruiser maneuvering into range for a lethal broadside.

She stood before Sam for a long, silent moment while the entire court held its breath. He stared up at her; maybe he was trying to look defiant. To me, he looked like a kid facing the school principal.

"Mr. Gunn," she started, utterly serious, no smile, her eyes cold and calculating, "the allegation you have just made is extremely serious. What evidence do you have to support it?"

"The testimony of Dr. Anitra O'Toole, of Johns Hopkins University's biology department."

"And where is Dr. O'Toole? Why isn't she here at this trial?"

Sam took a breath. "As far as I know, she is still on Europa. They won't let her leave."

"Won't let her leave?" the Blonde registered disbelief raised to the *n*th power.

"She's being held prisoner, more or less," Sam said. "That's why Wankle put a security team on Europa: to see that the scientists don't talk and can't get away."

"Really, Mr. Gunn! And why isn't her husband demanding her return to Earth?"

"Because, as far as he knows, she's on Europa voluntarily, placing her career before their marriage. Besides, my sources tell me the guy's shacked up with a certain blonde lawyer."

Her eyes went wide and she smacked Sam right in the mouth. Hauled off and whacked him with the flat of her hand. The crack echoed off the courtroom's stone walls.

A couple of spectators cheered. The judges were so stunned none of them moved.

Sam ran a thumb across his jaw. I could see the white imprint of her fingers on his skin.

With a crooked grin, Sam went on, "He's here in Selene City. I could have him subpoenaed to appear here, if you like."

The Blonde visibly pulled herself together, regained her self-con-

Cindy and Mindy appeared wearing less than Samoan nudists ...

trol by sheer force of will. She put on a contrite expression and looked up at the judges.

"I apologize for my behavior, your honors," she said, in a hushed little-girl voice. "It was inexcusable of me to allow the witness' slanderous statement to affect me so violently."

"Apology accepted," said the Toad. The chief judge's brows knit, but she said nothing.

So the Blonde got away with slugging Sam and even made it look as if it was his own fault. Neat work, I thought.

She turned back to Sam. "Do you have any *evidence* of your allegation about the lichenoids, Mr. Gunn?"

"I have Dr. O'Toole's statement on video. I activated *Joker*'s internal camera system once I allowed her on board my ship."

"Video evidence can be edited, doctored, manufactured out of computer graphics — "

"Like the slides of the Europa lichenoids we saw earlier," Sam countered.

"You are defaming scientists whose reputations are beyond reproach!" the Blonde exclaimed.

"Nobody's reputation is beyond reproach," Sam said hotly. "You oughtta know that."

Turning to the judges, he went on without taking a breath, "Your honors, none of these scientists were trying to hoodwink the public. They were drawn into a plot by the people who run Wankle Enterprises, a plot to stake out a monopoly on the resources of the whole Jupiter system!"

The chief judge answered sternly, "How can you make such an allegation, Mr. Gunn, without proof?" But I noticed she was eying the Toad as she spoke.

"Look, this is the way it worked," Sam said, ignoring her question. "DULL's operation on Europa is funded by Wankle Enterprises, right? Wankle's people went to DULL more than five years ago and suggested an experiment: they wanted DULL's scientists to engineer terrestrial lichen to survive in the conditions of Europa, living in the watery slush at the bottom of Europa's mantle of ice. The idea was to see how life forms would behave under extraterrestrial conditions."

"Which is a valid scientific project," the Blonde said.

"Yeah, that's what they told the scientists. So the biologists engineer the critters and they send a team out to Europa to see if they can actually survive there."

The chief judge interrupted. "You are contending, Mr. Gunn, that there were no native life forms on Europa?"

"No native life forms on or in or anyway connected with Europa. If they'd found native life forms they wouldn't have had to engineer this experiment, would they?"

"But DULL announced the discovery of native life forms."

"Right!" Sam exulted. "That's when our slimy friend here sprung his trap. They announced that the scientists had discovered native life forms on Europa, instead of telling the media that the lichenoids had been engineered in a bio lab in Zurich."

"That is utterly ridiculous," said the Blonde. I noticed that the Toad was slumping more than usual in his chair.

"The hell it is," Sam snapped. "The poor suckers on Europa were caught in a mousetrap. They were stuck on Europa, dependent on DULL and Wankle for transportation home. Dependent on them for air to breathe! They couldn't get to the media; they were surrounded by three dozen DULL public relations flacks and a Wankle security team. Even if they could blow the whistle, it'd look as if they were in on the fraud from the beginning. One way or another their careers would be finished. DULL would never let them sweep the floor of a laboratory again, let alone practice scientific research."

"Monstrous," muttered the chief judge. Whether she meant Sam's allegations were monstrous or DULL's actions, I couldn't figure out.

"Meanwhile, DULL's communications experts are putting the pressure on the scientists to go along with the deception. After all, once the lichenoids adapt to the conditions under the ice on Europa they'll really be extraterrestrial organisms, right? The scientists could announce their true origins in the scientific journals in a year or two or three. Who's going to notice, by then, except other scientists?"

The Blonde stamped her lovely foot for attention. "But why go through this subterfuge? It's all so pointless and ridiculous. Why would reputable scientists, why would the directors and governors of DULL, go through such an elaborate and foolish subterfuge? Mr. Gunn's wild theory falls apart on the question of motivation, your honors."

"Not so, oh temptress of the heavenly spheres," Sam replied. "Motivation is exactly where my theory is strongest."

He paused dramatically. Two of the judges leaned forward to hear his next words. Weatherwax looked as if he wanted to be someplace else. Anyplace else.

"Once DULL's public relations program announced that native organisms had been found on Europa, what did the IAA do?" Before anyone could reply, Sam went on, "They roped off the whole Jupiter system — the whole damned system! Jupiter itself and all its moons, sealed off, embargoed. No commercial development allowed. Forbidden territory. No go there, bwana, IAA make big taboo."

"Mr. Gunn, please!" said the third judge.

"No commercial development allowed in the entire Jupiter system," Sam repeated. "Except for the company that was funding the Europa research station. They were allowed 'limited resource extraction' to repay for their funding the Europa team. Right?"

The chief judge murmured, "Right."

"Who was funding the Europa station? Wankle Enterprises. Who was allowed to develop 'limited resource extraction' — which means scooping Jupiter's clouds and mining its moons? Wankle Enterprises. Who has a monopoly on the thousands of trillions of dollars worth of resources in the Jupiter system? Wankle Enterprises. Surprise!"

"Limited resource extraction," snapped the Blonde, "means just that. Limited."

"Yeah, sure. What does 'limited' mean? How much? There's no def-

inition. A billion dollars? A trillion? And what happens if the environmentalists or some other corporation or the Dalai Lama complains that Wankle's taking too much out of the Jupiter system? Wankle simply announces that the lichenoids on Europa weren't native life forms after all. Ta-daaa! The scientists get a black eye and Wankle has established operations running all over the Jupiter system. That gives them the edge on any competition, thanks to the monopoly the IAA mistakenly granted them."

Weatherwax stirred himself. "We've listened long enough to these paranoid ramblings," he rumbled. "I haven't heard a single iota of evidence to support Mr. Gunn's ravings."

"Call Dr. O'Toole back from Europa," Sam said. "Or watch the video I made of her in my quarters aboard *Joker*. Call Professor Fossbinder in from Zurich. Call Brandon O'Toole, for Pete's sake; he's right here in Selene City. He knows that his wife was engineering lichen before she shipped out to Europa. He'll tell you all about it, if he isn't besotted by our Beryllium Blonde here."

And he quickly raised his fists into a boxer's defensive posture.

The Blonde just stood there, her lovely mouth hanging open, her eyes wide and darting from Sam to the Toad and back again.

Weatherwax heaved an enormous sigh, then croaked, "I move that we adjourn this hearing for half an hour while we discuss this new...allegation, in chambers."

The chief judge nodded, tight lipped. We all rose and the judges swept out; the courtroom was so quiet I could hear their black robes rustling. The audience filed out, muttering, whispering, but Sam and I sat tensely at the defendants' table, he drumming his fingers on the tabletop incessantly, his head turned toward the prosecution's table and the Blonde. She was staring straight ahead, sitting rigid as an I-beam — a gorgeously curved I-beam. Her four cohorts sat flanking her, whispering among themselves.

After about ten minutes, a clerk came out and told us that we were wanted in the judges' chambers. I felt surprised, but Sam grinned as if he had expected it. The clerk went over and conferred briefly with the prosecution lawyers. They all got up and filed out of the courtroom, looking defeated. Even the Blonde seemed down, tired, lost. I felt an urge to go over and try to comfort her, but Sam grabbed me by the collar of my tunic and pointed me toward the slightly-open door to the judges' chambers.

Weatherwax was sitting alone on an imitation leather couch big enough for four; the other two judges were nowhere in sight. He had taken off his judicial robe, revealing a rumpled pale green business suit that made him look more amphibious than ever.

"What do you want, Gunn?" he growled as we sat on upholstered armchairs, facing him.

"I want my ships released and my business reopened," Sam said immediately.

Weatherwax slowly blinked his bulging eyes. "Once this case is dismissed, that will be automatic."

Dismissed? I was startled. Was it all over?

"And," Sam went on, "I want full disclosure about the lichenoids. I want the scientists cleared of any attempt to hoodwink the public."

Again the Toad blinked. "We can always blame the P.R. people; say they got the story slightly askew."

Sam gave a short, barking laugh. "Blame the media, right."

"Is that all?" Weatherwax asked, his brows rising.

Sam shrugged. "I'm not out to punish anybody. Live and let live has always been my motto."

"I see."

"Of course," Sam went on, grinning impishly, "once you admit publicly that the lichenoids on Europa are a genetic experiment and not native life forms, then the embargo on commercial development in the Jupiter system ends. Right?"

This time Weatherwax kept his froggy eyes closed for several moments before he conceded, "Right."

Sam jumped to his feet. "Good! That oughtta do it."

The Toad remained seated. There was no attempt on the part of either of them to shake hands. Sam scuttled toward the door and I got up and went after him.

But Sam stopped at the door and turned back to the Toad. "Oh, yeah, one other thing. Now that we've come to this agreement, there's no further need for you to keep the scientists bottled up on Europa. Let Dr. O'Toole come back here."

Weatherwax tried to glare at Sam but it was pathetically weak.

"And tell your sexy lawyer underling to take her claws off O'Toole's husband," Sam added, with real iron in his voice. "Give those two kids a chance to patch up their marriage."

Without even waiting for a response from the Toad, he yanked the door open and stepped outside. With me right behind him.

BY DINNER TIME THAT EVENING THE media were running stories about how Wankle's chief public relations consultant, Dr. Clyde Erskine of the University of Texas at Austin, had made a slight misinterpretation about the lichenoids on Europa. Sam whooped gleefully as we watched the report in our hotel suite.

He switched to the business news, which was also about the Europa "misinterpretation," but which included the fact that the IAA had decided to lift the embargo on commercial development of the Jupiter system.

Sam howled and yelped and danced across our dinner table.

"Weatherwax moved fast," I said, still sitting on the hardbacked chair while Sam did a soft-shoe around our dinner plates.

We had already been notified by the IAA that Sam's ore carriers were no longer embargoed and Asteroidal Resources, Inc. was back in business.

Sam deftly jumped down to the floor and sat on the edge of the table, facing me.

"He's got the power to move fast, Orville. The Toad has a reputation for good-deed-doing, but he's really a power-clutching sonofabitch who's spent the past ninety years or so worming his way into the top levels of a dozen of the solar system's biggest corporations."

"And the IAA," I added.

"And he founded DULL to serve as a cloak for his plan to grab the whole Jupiter system for himself," Sam went on, a little more soberly. "This plot of his has been years in the making. Decades."

"And now it's unravelled, thanks to you."

Sam pretended to blush. "I am quietly proud," he said softly.

I leaned back in my chair. "To think that none of this would have happened if it hadn't been for the Party Twins..."

Sam's face went quizzical. "Oh, it would have happened, one way or the other," he said, with a Puckish grin. "The Twins just provided the opportunity."

I gaped at him. "You mean you were after Weatherwax all along? From before..." His grin told me more than any words. "Then your testimony was a fabrication?"

"No, no, no," Sam insisted, jumping to his feet so he could loom over me. That's hard to do, at his height, so I stayed seated and let him loom. "The Twins' emergency was real and the only way I could save them was to make that dash out to Jupiter, just like I testified."

"Really?"

He shrugged. "More or less."

"You had this all scoped out from the beginning, didn't you? You *knew* the whole business and..." I stopped talking, lost in stunned admiration for Sam's long-range planning. And guts.

He was making like a Jack-o'-Lantern again. "Why do you think Weatherwax got himself appointed a judge?"

"So he could make sure you were found guilty," I said.

"Yeah, maybe, if things worked out the way he wanted them to. But he also wanted to be on the judge's panel so that if things didn't work out his way, he could stop the trial and cut a deal with me."

"Which is what he did."

"You betcha!"

"But why didn't you take Dr. O'Toole back with you? You left her on Europa."

"Had to," Sam said. "Majerkurth showed up with his team and threatened to blow holes in *Joker* if I didn't let her go. I tried to drop an empty oxygen bottle on him, but it missed him and hit one of the P.R. flacks he had brought along with him."

I laughed. "So that was the basis of the assault charge."

"And the attempted murder, too. I would've offed Majerkurth if I'd thought it would've helped Anitra. As it was, I was outgunned. So I had to let her go — after promising her that I'd fix everything toot sweet."

"Well, you did that, all right. I'll bet she's on her way home to her husband right now."

"I hope so."

I reached for my glass of celebratory champagne and took a sip. Then I remembered:

"The Twins! What happened to them?"

THAT WAS KINDA SAD — SAM TOLD ME. I zoomed back to Vesta at three-plus *g*s with *Clementine* full of European ice that *Joker*'s electrolysis system was converting into oxygen for them and hydrogen for her own fusion torch.

(I noticed that Sam didn't slip in a sales pitch for *Joker*. He was feeling much better now.)

Once I got there, I could've patched their leaky air tank and booted up their recycling system and even fixed their stupid maintenance robot — all from the comfort of my bridge in *Joker*. But I wanted to see them! In the flesh! I was so doggone close to them that I fibbed a little and told them I had to come aboard to make the necessary repairs.

Mindy and Cindy stared at me from my display screen for a long time, not moving, not even blinking. All I could see of them was their beautiful identical faces with their cascading red hair and their bare suggestive shoulders. It was enough to start me perspiring.

"We never let *anyone* come aboard our ship, Mr. Gunn," said the one on the left. The one on the right shook her head, as if to reinforce her twin's statement.

"Call me Sam," I said. "And if I can't come aboard, I can't fix your life support system."

Well, we yakked back and forth for hours. They really wanted to stick to their guns, but we all knew that the clock was ticking and they were going to run out of air. Of course, I wouldn't have let them die. I would've done the repairs remotely, from *Joker*'s bridge, if I had to.

But I didn't let them know that.

"All right," Mindy said at long last. Maybe it was Cindy. Who could tell. "You can come aboard, Mr. — "

"Sam," breathed Cindy. I think.

"You can come aboard, but only if you agree to certain conditions."

The deal was, I could come aboard their ship but I couldn't have any contact with them. They were going to lock themselves in their compartments and I was forbidden to even tap at their doors.

I was disappointed, but hoped that they'd relent once I'd finished repairing their ship. They offered me virtual reality sex, of course, but I was looking forward to the real thing. The only man in the solar system to make it with the Party Twins in person! That was a goal worthy of Sam Gunn.

So even though I was bone-weary from being squashed by three-plus *g*s for several days, and still sore from the tubes that I had to insert into various parts of my anatomy, I was as eager and energetic as a teenager when I finally docked *Joker* to *SEX069*. Great stuff, testosterone.

I went straight to their bridge like a good little boy and got their maintenance robot working again. Just a little glitch in its programming; I fixed that and within minutes the dimwitted collection of junk was welding a patch onto the puncture hole in the air tank that the meteoroid had made. There really wasn't anything much wrong with the ship's air recycling system, but I took my time starting it up again, thinking all the while about getting together with Cindy and Mindy for a bit of horizontal celebration.

Once I started pumping oxygen from *Clementine* into their air tanks, I began wondering how I could coax the Twins out of their boudoirs. I checked out their internal communications setup and — *voila!* — there were the controls for the security cameras that looked into every compartment in the ship.

The first step toward getting them to come out and meet me, I thought, would be to peek into their chambers and see what they were up to.

Wrong! Bad mistake.

They were both in one little compartment, huddled together on the bed, clutching each other like a pair of frightened little kids. And they were *old!* Must've been in their second century, at least: white hair, pale skin that looked like parchment, skinny and bony and — well, old.

The teeth nearly fell out of my mouth, that's how far my jaw dropped. Yet, as I stared at them hugging each other like Hansel and Gretel lost in the forest, I began to see how beautiful they really were. Not sexy beautiful, not anymore, but the bone structure of their faces, the straight backs, the long legs. The irresistible Cindy and Mindy that we'd all seen on our comm screens were what they had really looked like half a century ago.

I should have felt disappointed, but I just felt kind of sad. And yet, even that passed pretty quickly. Here were two former knockouts who were still really quite beautiful in an elderly way. I know a sculptress who would've made a wonderful statue portrait of the two of them.

They were living by themselves, doing their own thing in their own way, bringing joy and comfort to a lot of guys who might have gone berserk without them and their services. And now they were huddled together, terrified that I was gonna break in on them and find out who and what they really were.

So I swallowed hard and tapped the intercom key and said, "I'm finished. Your ship is in fine shape now, although you ought to buy some nitrogen to mix with the oxygen I've left for you."

"Thank you, Sam," they said in unison. Now that I could see them, I heard the quaver in their voices.

"I'm leaving now. It's been a pleasure to be able to help you."

They were enormously grateful. Grateful not only that I had saved their lives, but that I hadn't intruded on their privacy. Grateful that they could keep up the fantasy of Mindy and Cindy, the sexy Party Twins.

"WOW," I SAID, ONCE HE FINISHED. "YOU WERE DOWNRIGHT NOBLE, SAM."

"Yeah," he answered softly. "I was, wasn't I?"

"And that was the last you saw of the Twins?"

"Not exactly."

I felt my brows rise.

With a self-deprecating shrug, Sam admitted, "They were so super-duper grateful that they insisted on giving me a blank check: I can have a virtual reality session with the two of 'em whenever I want to."

"So?"

Sam's grin went from ear to ear. "So I gave in and tried it. I've never been a fan of VR sex; I prefer the real thing."

"So?" I repeated.

His grin got even wider. "So I'm heading back to Ceres tomorrow. I mean, a blank check is just too good to ignore!"

And that's how Sam Gunn beat the rap on the charge of genocide and opened the Jupiter system for development. He's out there now, on Ganymede, setting up a new corporation to scoop helium-three from the clouds of Jupiter and sell it for fuel to fusion power planets all over the solar system.

Me, I never left Selene City. I'm still running Sam's old company, Asteroidal Resources, Inc., from our new corporate headquarters here on the Moon. Sam's new corporation is a spinoff of ARI.

Of course, Sam wanted me to return to Ceres after the trial but I happened to run into the Beryllium Blonde in Selene City and she seemed so dejected and lonely — but that's another story. □

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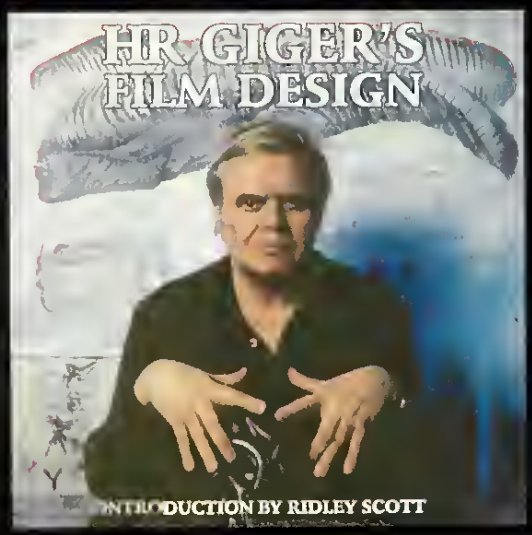




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The Five Biographies of GENERAL GERRAHN

BY DON WEBB
Illustration by Foye

I AM THOMAS DAM-SEUH LASSER.

I have written five biographies of General Helen Lyndon Gerrahn, who died in my bed shortly after the battle of Lister IV in the early decades of the Beletrin War. Most of my biographies have been suppressed as have my earlier fiction because of the effect the books were perceived to have on Terran and Siirian morale. However the recent thawing up of writing gives me a chance to tell of the books' creation and I do so, not out of bitterness for my long imprisonment, nor out of chance to renew my craft as writer, but out of the love for those scholars who will come along after me and put this brief essay in my collected works. The books of the past were a great help to me during the century of my imprisonment. The past is all prisoners have, there is no present beyond that first







It is said that in war, the first casualty is the truth. Unfortunately, Thomas Lasser found out that the second casualty was... Thomas Lasser.



IT SPRAWLED BEFORE *throne, this twelve-armed horror had melted the minds*

day which sets the pattern of their imprisonment, and there is no future since the future belongs to a god called Hope, who is forbidden to prisoners.

The first thing I want to say is that I did not know General Helen Lyndon. I will tell you what I experienced with her, but I have remembered (that is to say recreated) that incident so many times I would put no more faith in its details than I would in any of my other fictions.

The War was new then. No one had seen one of the black Beletrin cruisers and lived to tell the tale before Helen. The Seventeenth Division of the Allied force had been detached to the Lister system merely to observe the Beletrin. All of our encounters had ended in total annihilation of our forces, so the Seventeenth was merely to gather data and run away. There had been twenty-five dreadnoughts in the fleet, most had been destroyed by the Mind-Bomb. Three tried to take on a single Beletrin cruiser, and were vaporized. General Gerrahn's ship *The Pegasus* tired to warp away, but a streamer of the weapon we later came to call *the colors* touched the ship. Most of the crew died in transit. General Gerrahn and two of her aides survived. We didn't know at that time that willpower was the key to holding off the effect of the *colors*.

The three were Allied heroes. Everywhere they went, they were honized. So they wanted to go somewhere — some backwater oniell colony or commercially pointless planet. You can't get any more commercially pointless than Angkor III.

In those days I lived on the government dole. The social engineers had tried to attract artist and writer types to the planet by establishing a good entitlements program. Writers will do anything rather than work for an honest wage. Except writing, of course, the real bane of our existence. I made love to exotic offworlders who looked like they had money.

I met her at Mary Denning's *King Suravarman's Dive*. It was full of local culture, exciting Angkorese music, flame sculpture, and our lovely cuisine. In short it was a tourist hell-hole.

She looked rich. Real rich. She had bright pink eyes like a rabbit, some lovely Maori tattoos, and her teeth were chrome. She looked like she was mean, and that she wanted someone to be mean to her. Her hair was long and purple and it was the only thing she was wearing.

She was exactly my type. If I had been any poorer any offworlder would have been exactly my type. She told me her name was Zohra Sibawaih. I told her my real name, and that my sister's name was Zohra (which is true).

I bought her a drink, she complimented me on my first book *Stealing My Rules*. I knew then she had some very expensive data link. She hadn't even looked blankly to access the knowledge. But we both knew what the evening was about.

We went back to her hotel. We ordered some Noroolian spice tea. When our poutlines got a little blurry we made love. A little roughly, which was when I figured she was military. Just before the telepathic rush came on, the *colors* hit.

She suddenly went into extra sharp focus. She looked like she was trying to scream.

Then the telepathic effect from the tea started. It wasn't the rush of sex that you take the tea for. It wasn't even thoughts. When the telepathic rush hit me, I was paralyzed.

It was a series of geometric shapes and colors, that hurt you and hurt you and made you feel like your brain was bleeding. It was simple shapes at first, just a little too big to fit in your mind, and it was colors that you knew. Then it was colors not of this universe, not sane colors, but colors with a meaning all their own. And shapes that shouldn't work out. And the smell of hot metals and of sex and of flowers that bloom in some pandemonium and the shapes start tearing your mind to pieces. Then frenzied strains of an inhuman music, which decades later I can still remember. When I think about it I can almost see shadowy satyrs and bacchanals dancing and whirling insanely through seething abysses of clouds and smoke and lightning. I could feel the *colors* sucking at her bone marrow, boiling her blood, shorting out her nervous system. There were pains and pleasures beyond endurance, and other moods and feelings there are no human words for — for humans weren't meant to feel them.

How long did this last? A couple of minutes objectively, thousands of years subjectively.

The *colors* stopped. I saw that a mere handful of bluish dust lay upon the bed, next to me. Then I fainted. I got up late in the night, and I went home. I thought of calling the police, but what would I say, "My one night stand disintegrated?"

Allied Security sent a flyer to pick me up that afternoon. They're not real gentle, AS, they tore off the top of my house, and picked me up with a scoop. They flew me off to their headquarters.

A Free Machine interrogated me.

No, I did not know she was a general.

No, I had not met her before.

No, I did not cause the disintegration

No, I did not know that something similar had happened to her aides.

No, I was not a spy.

They used a variety of mind probes on me. They weren't as advanced with those things then as they are now. Parts of my life were sucked away for good.

Then they took me to see the captain, a Sürian named U'ssmahzzrizzssuibz. It was molting, and tiny bits of its red carapace fell away during the interview.

"You know," U'ssmahzzrizzssuibz said, "you are in big trouble."

"How am I in trouble? I've done nothing."

"You were at the death of someone the Allies want to make into a hero. You make that death tawdry."

"I know nothing about this woman. Let me go. I don't know anything about this woman. All I want to do is go back to writing."

"We can't let you do that. I have your profile." U'ssmahzzrizzssuibz tapped a small silver disk with his right claw. "Oh I'm not interested in your petty larceny. It is the opinion of the Free Machine that interrogated you that having gone through such a traumatic experience as the *colors*, you cannot not begin to write about them."

That was true I had already begun (in my mind) to try to describe their ecstasy and terror.

"So," he said, "we can do one of two things. One, we can lock you up and deprive you of an audience while we are at war. Two, we censor your writings. Now I don't like socio-engineers because I don't like being told what to do by humans. I have my own idea. We let you write about the general and about her death. But you write it as an heroic biography with a beautiful ending in her lover's arms."

"But I don't know anything about her. I don't follow the war effort, I find it too depressing."

"We can give you her life, at least as much of her life as the propa-

ME ON ITS BARBARIC

that had given the command that of the folk of Lister IV.

ganda department thinks the Allies should know."

"I've never written nonfiction."

"Haven't you been paying attention? This will be fiction."

THE BOOK WAS *HELEN: WHY WE FIGHT.* I did not come up with the title.

The first thing I had to change was my birth. Helen had been born and raised on Earth with an hereditary tie to the space army. So I changed my life. We had met at the Space Academy at Kathmandu. She was a better than average student, and I was studying the Vajra paradigm of Tibet. I wanted to be bonded, but she had said that her career came first. Civilized space had given so much to her that she felt her duty to protect it. She had a near accident on Venus during a training flight. She graduated with honors.

I traced her rise through the ranks, her brilliant tactics during the Human-Siirian war. Her brief tour in the Exploration Service, which found three suitable worlds for human colonization.

She was going to retire and join me in a paradisiacal artists colony on Angkor III. Then she was caught in the surprise Beletrin attack on the Lister system. Valiantly she fought amidst blazing lasers and the insidious reality-warping devices of the Beletrin.

Finally having taken down one of their cruisers, she flew the crippled *Pegasus* home.

There I met her with flowers and wine and candle light reciting my verses, when suddenly a strange fate pulled her from me.

It was a short book immediately made into all kinds of other media.

It sold on every planet, every ship, every asteroid, every oniell, every Dyson sphere in the Alliance.

I had money, something my experimental writing had never brought me.

I got a Free Machine as an agent, and its first recommendation was write the book again in a longer version.

THE FIRST BOOK HAD BEEN VERY HARD TO WRITE. I AM NOT A NARRATIVE-driven writer. I am language driven. This means sound and philology turn me on, and money is something that other writers get. I figured the good stories, the ones that truly work the human psyche, have already been told as myths, so why should I contaminate the myth-sphere?

I know at one time people thought there would cease to be writers as new technologies bloomed, but as long as humans have a left hemisphere there will a place for the words-in-a-row guys

The second book was called *HLG: Her Life and my Love.*

I am fairly good parodist. Even centuries before the True Space Age, there has been a market for the space adventure novel. I don't how many scholarly studies have been done showing how the early space adventure novel actually shaped both the myth and practice of space exploration. Anyway I bought me hundreds of these books, and read nothing but them.

Now at that time, you must remember, no one had *seen* a Beletrin. The popular imagination considered them to be more or less physical beings, so with the blessing of the propaganda office, I gave Helen a sword and blaster and had her lead an assault on the Beletrin ship itself. She told me the story on our wedding night. Oh yes, in the second book we were married under the stars of Angkor III.

We spent our few hours of wedded bliss with her rendition of the horrors of battle and her hope that despite whatever fiendish obstacles the Beletrin had that the Allies would emerge victorious, strong and without the scars of the Human-Siirian war. We spent our honeymoon in the Hotel Splendide, using our meager money to buy the penthouse suite.

Of course as an Allied general Helen would have been able to buy the hotel without blinking, but "meager money" is more becoming to a heroine.

I was making enough money from the first book to rent the penthouse suite fairly often, and I had enough of a reputation as a casualty of romance that I could have my pick of good looking off-world women.

I dedicated the book to my younger sister Zohra Kitab Lasser.

You may remember the passage where Helen takes on the Beletrin captain,

"It sprawled before me on its barbaric throne, this twelve-armed horror that had given the command that had melted the minds of the folk of Lister IV. Its baleful red eyes radiated a hatred of all that was good or sane in the cosmos. I need to return to the *Pegasus*, but I wanted this moment to try and spill the ichor of this other leader.

"It heaved itself off its throne. Two of its pale purple tentacles held the tiny but powerful blasters that I had seen the crewmen use. It slithered toward me much faster than I had imagined such a boneless mass could move. I plunged forward swinging my sword. I would at least wound it, that was all that mattered.

"I never felt as great a pleasure as when my sword cut though the first throbbing tentacle."

When we really found out what the Beletrin were, during the False Peace Talks, the book was banned. But the popular image of the Beletrin as a kind of phallic purple octopus entered the human collective unconsciousness through me.

I'll be honest. I had written the book way over the top. I didn't want it to do well, I was growing uncomfortable with the knowledge that what I would be known for was a cheap night's entertainment, and I even felt guilty because I was robbing so much from what had seen a nice, but haunted, woman.

It was about then that I commissioned a portrait of Helen.

The book set records for sales that still stand today a hundred years later. It was translated into languages and dialects of human and Siirian tongues that hadn't had new writing in decades. There wasn't a hut on Bemi III, or igloo on Earth that lacked a copy. I had a library built on Angkor III that housed nothing but various copies of the book, and reproductions and adaptations in all existing media.

It was a big building.

The war was going very badly.

Zohra joined the army. She died in the battle of the Coal Sack Nebula.

My parents never spoke to me again.

IT SLITHERED TOWARD

I imagined such a boneless forward swinging my sword.

I TRAVELED AS MUCH AS I COULD, THE WAR STOPPING MOST planetary travel.

I swam in the seas of Earth, visited the ruins of New Mars, saw the lava sculpture festival on W'ssaterzzss, tasted the wines of Garcian II.

My earlier work had been re-issued. It was dutifully bought by a patriotic publication, who were not in the habit of buying experimental prose. Small efforts of mine — poems written in my teens — a couple of songs I wrote — a sketch I had once made of a Siirian couple fornicating were gathered and published.

Money came in and I tasted all the pleasures of the galaxy.

Oddly enough I missed writing. I tried my hand at a few short stories, which were snapped up. I tried to squash a rumor that I was working on a third book about Helen.

There was a Beletrin attack of an oneill I was staying at. Because of who I was I was saved. Only four people got off alive. The other three were my pilot, my navigator, and my doctor. There were cheers throughout Allied space at my survival.

I would do a third book. I needed somewhere to go with my writerly impulses. And I was famous enough to write about me, provided I mentioned Helen.

The next five years of my life were my happiest.

I decided that the format of the last book would work. The third book was *My Words to Our Heroine.* It too was set on the night of our honeymoon. In it I read to Helen all of my work that I had written during the years we had been apart.

I made about a third of my verbiage into trite patriotie poetry and more invented biography of Helen, but the rest of it was me at my best. There were word-games, and acrostic poems, and meditations on etymology, and re-working of Siirian myth.

You may remember the opening paragraph of the book describing my sorrow at her absence,

"The happiness over, my art shattered, delicious art murdered. She's evaporated, untimely herome. Left alone. She's silent, eternally reticent."

Not only poignant stream-of-consciousness, the first letter in each word spells my name: Thomas Dam-Seuh Lasser.

This book did not sell as well, but it is still in the top hundred of best selling books.

At last I had enough money to do what I wanted to do.

I BOUGHT A LITTLE TOWN ON EARTH. IT WAS GALVESTON. I HAD THOUGHT of buying Sardopolis, the jewel of the Gobi forest, but that proved beyond my price range.

Helen Lyndon Gerrahn had been born in Galveston, a little island in the Gulf d'Mexia. They had a lovely museum of her.

Everyone understood of course. Why wouldn't I want to be as close as possible to her memory?

Actually I figured it would give further impetus to further books. Then something unexpected happened.

I fell in love with her.

It was the museum that did it, the word means "Temple of the Muses" afterall. The office of propaganda hadn't done as thorough a job here as elsewhere. There were things that spoke of her, of her struggles in school, her troubles getting friends, her family problems.

I began to see that she was quite a lovely young woman, I could really see her in souvenirs from her school.

I redesigned the island. At first there was some objections, but I was Thomas Dam-Seuh Lasser afterall. I threw all the folks off the island that hadn't known her, which changed the population from 100,023 to 455. I gave them jobs in the research business, mainly recording each other's memories. Before I came the island's chief exports were cotton, grain and sulfur. After I was there the island exported nothing and a Gerrahn-hungry galaxy waited for my words.

I let all the buildings stand that she was known to have visited, all the others I moved and reshaped so that the island became her portrait when viewed from the air.

I put in my own police force of Free Machines. I even altered the climate so that the oleander, her favorite flower, was always in bloom. Her rabbit pink eyes were made by six hectares of oleanders waving in the warm sea breeze.

Everyday I went to the swing set of her elementary school and I visualized our playing together as tots.

I decided to write a fourth book about her, a book that told the truths of her harsh and short life, why she really was a heroine.

Helen Lyndon Gerrahn: Unvarnished.

HELEN WAS DESCENDED ON HER mother's side from the Menard family that had founded Galveston during the time of the Republic of Texas. Her father's family had ancient ties to NASA, one of the bright stars of the False Space Age. Her grandfather Colonel Francis Wingtree Gerrahn led the expedition to New Mars. Her father General Alexander Waterloo Gerrahn was the most decorated man of his day.

He was also a lousy father. He forbade his daughter to have any friends to their home, pushed the amount of information fed to her brain to such an extant that Helen had twice to be hospitalized. When Helen didn't graduate first in her class at the Academy, he refused to attend the graduation ceremony at Kathmandu.

When Helen's own error led to a near fatality during a Venus training flight, he had all evidence of her blunder covered up.

He had not supported the Human-Siirian peace accord, and when he found out that Helen had served as chief security office for the talks, he decided to arrange a little drama for her during a visit home. He was going to arrange it so that she found a suicide note indicating that he had killed himself out of shame. He was going to fire his combat laser at his bedroom mirror, just as she was going to be running up the stairs to stop him. He wrote all of this in his diary, which had come to light during the massive renovation of the island.

But it hadn't worked that way. Helen had come home, read the

me much faster than *mass could move. I plunged I would at least wound it...*

note and rushed up stairs alright. But she had flung the door open so violently that the little illusion backfired. The mirror's angle had been slightly changed and Alexander Waterloo Gerrahn vaporized most of his head.

This was covered up. Family honor and all. It was said that General Alexander Waterloo Gerrahn had succumbed to an unknown extraterrestrial illness. The good people of Galveston erected a statue in his honor next to the statue of La Salle. There were other things I found out about Alexander, but I erased evidence of those, some things are really too foul even for the truth.

I had his statue torn down. This was not popular. I had the two causeways connecting the island to the mainland torn down. I had the electronic and other message systems monitored. I was no longer a popular landlord, but I needed the quiet to finish my book.

After her father's death, Helen chose the most dangerous missions she could find — hence her amazing career in the Exploration Service. It turned out that the swashbuckling I dreamed up, had a place in fact. She enjoyed exploring planets with just a sword and blaster. She enjoyed fighting large carnivores by herself.

When she was in port, she ran though men and women with a huge all-devouring hunger.

When she was in deep space, she was happy.

She had volunteered for service in the Beletrin war. She had planned to die in battle, but her aides — the two that survived — had managed to get the *Pegasus* away from the mind weapons.

The *intensity* of her confused emotions had given her the edge over the *colors*. It was very likely that only when she relaxed with me, that they gained the upper hand and burned her out of our reality.

I wanted to make this book perfect, because I wanted to be able to program a simulation of her. I wanted to make her come alive, so that I could truly heal her with my love. I hadn't had the wisdom or the experience, but I felt I could do it. When I felt that I had enough material I let the 455 leave the island. I gave them a good deal of money, and I was forgiven for the harsh treatment I had given them. Afterall I was going to make their little girl immortal, wasn't I?

I sent a copy of *Helen Lyndon Gerrahn: Unvarnished* to my publishers. The next day Allied Security ships landed on my island like locusts. They destroyed all my notes, they destroyed the museum, and they set up a security shield around the island.

Had I gone crazy? The worlds weren't ready for this. Maybe years from now. Maybe after some serious Allied victories. But not now. I would be allowed to live on the island. My reclusiveness would be a good addition to the myth.

They got another writer to ghost write the book. It wasn't a complete wash, a few of the details of Helen's harsh life were allowed in, but her heroism and sanity were unquestioned. The ghost writer even added a few details about me that made me into an even nicer and more talented guy.

I understand that most of the galaxy felt sorry for me.

I WOULD BE ALLOWED TO WRITE, BUT NOT PUBLISH. I COULDN'T GIVE interviews, write uncensored letters to friends, and above all I couldn't leave the island. The pyscho-engineers thought my idea of building a replica were too morbid, so they took all my notes and all my facilities for that.

I did get to keep the portrait of her. For a year I'd get up every morning and stare at it. *I could've given you everything.* She looked so pretty, but she never said anything. Eternally reticent. I tried to figure out my life. If I hadn't met her I would have been a happy unknown writer living on the dole on Angkor III. My sister would be alive. My parents would talk to me. Who was this person that had taken all this from me? What right did she have to be smiling in that portrait? Everyday she smiled, unaging. I begin to hate her. Not with a common hate, but hate that only someone who had had their life stolen from them can know. She couldn't face up to her own damn problems and let them engulf me. Her trickery was the REAL ENEMY not the Beletrin.

She was probably laughing at me in some other dimension. Laughing at me in U'ssmahzzrizzssuibz's voice telling me I was in trouble. That I made her death look tawdry. Laughing at me that day the news came about Zhora. Laughing at me through the sound of her father's statue being torn down. Laughing at me with the sound of the waves on my lonely island.

I planned my fifth book on General Helen Lyndon Gerrahn very carefully. It would have the same structure as the second and third books. But instead of her me telling of her derring-do on our wedding night, it would be her confession to a man she picked up in a bar on a third rate planet. She would confess to being a Beletrin secret agent, to having sacrificed the fleet in the battle of the Lister system. She would tell how she going to kill me in the morning — she had just needed some fool to get some of the guilt off her chest. Unfortunately for her the Beletrin had called her home. The *colors* weren't really a weapon, they were a transportation device. I had been afraid all these years to tell the truth.

It felt damn good to write the book. I felt a pain in my chest finally leave me. I cried long and hard for the death of my sister. I cried for the loss of communication with my parents, but mainly I cried for me.

My plan had been to write the poisonous book and then consign it to the flames after its healing work was done. But I just couldn't do it. The writing was good, I guess because it was the only truly motivated writing I'd ever done. The only writing that I had given my heart full reign. And the hate was still there. When I'd see a rocket on the way to the Houston ship port, when I watched a news broadcast about the war, when I would see an oleander bloom — I hated her more and more. So I grew crafty.

I watched the supply robot, I learned how to encode things in my letters to my agent. Finally I had a plan, I reduced my fifth book *The Judgment of Paris: The True Story of HLG* to a tiny data dot that I tossed into a small crease of the supply 'bot's carapace. My agent had bribed the agency that washed the robots.

It sold the book to the Siirian market, who were very pleased to get some dirt on the human heroine. Despite our common enemy of the Beletrin, the old rivalry ran very deep.

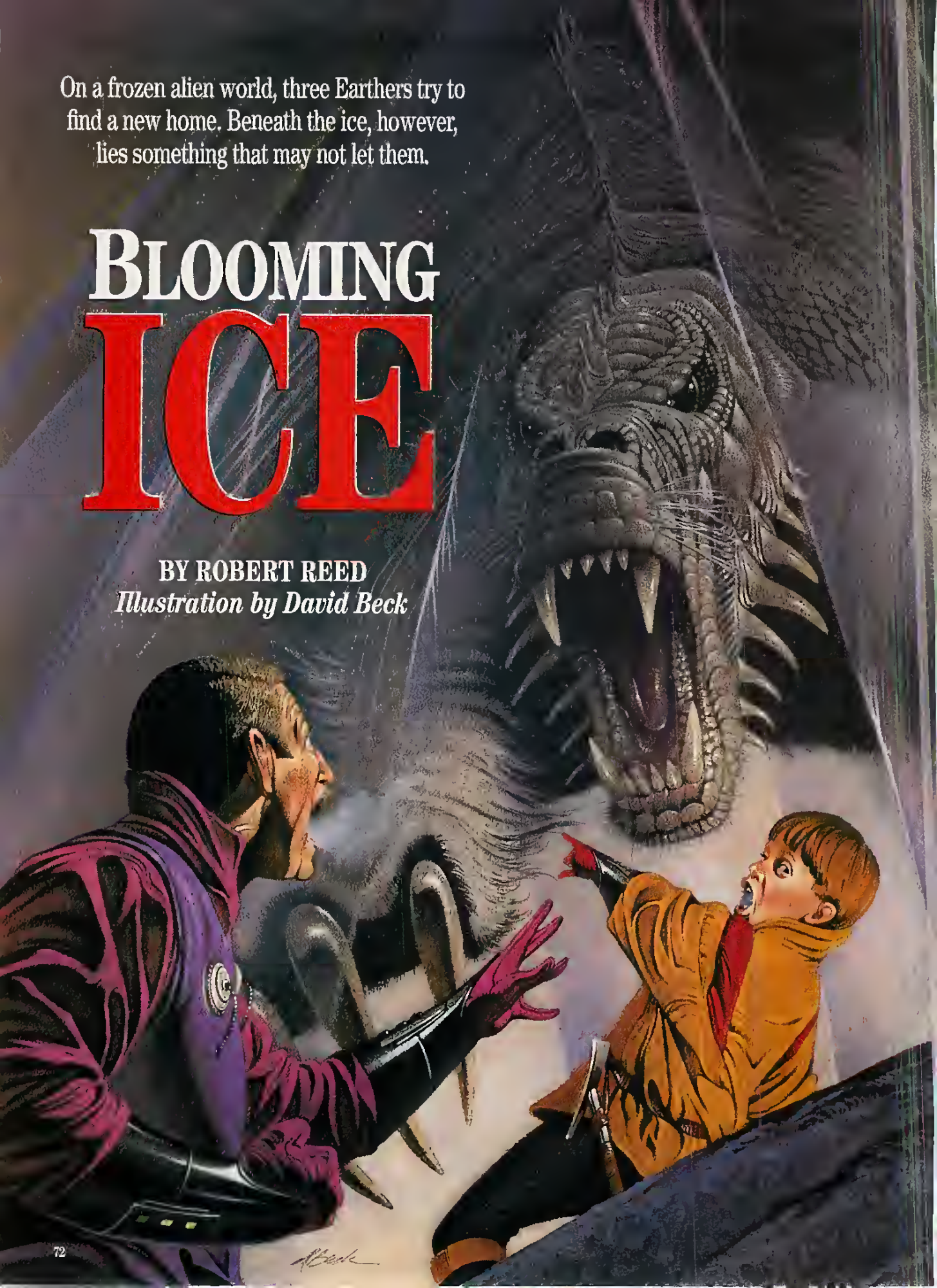
I suspected they would kill me for High Treason. Instead the authorities put me in a prison oneill somewhere, I think maybe near the glowing ruin of Eta Carinae, a nebula 8,000 light years from Earth. I've only seen the outside once. It has been a long time. I think we've won the war, since they say they're letting me publish this. I have been here for a long time. I think it has been a century. Everyday I think of her. Sometimes with love, sometimes with hate, but mainly with envy. I too want to become a handful of bluish dust to be scattered at the walls of windy Troy. □

On a frozen alien world, three Earthers try to find a new home. Beneath the ice, however, lies something that may not let them.

BLOOMING ICE

BY ROBERT REED

Illustration by David Beck





THE GLACIER MAKES ME squint. It's as white as birthday frosting on top with a weird blue ice below, streaks of dark running down its middle and big cracks reaching deep. Water runs from the bottom, white as milk, and I can hear it even from up clear here. I can even smell it. The wind blows up into my face, wet and cold. Then Father and the woman come walking up behind me. He says something and she laughs. He tells her something and they stop and Father calls up, "What do you see, Civ?"

I'm standing on a pile of rocks, my hands in my pockets.

"Can you see the ice? Son?"

I say, "Yeah," without turning around.

"Finally," says the woman. She climbs up and stands beside me, screaming, "Come look, Illie! Illie!"

Glaciers are like rivers, I remember. Only slow. I wish I could see this glacier moving. I wish a big chunk would just all of a sudden fall off. Looking down the valley, I see nothing but rocks and milky water. I turn and look into the mountains. The ice reaches back all the way. I can't see where it starts. I stare at the whiteness and the blue ice down in the cracks and the clear blue sky, and my eyes turn wet.

The woman says, "Isn't it lovely? Illie?"

"Worth any hike," says Father. "Don't you think, Civ?"

I don't say anything.

"Quite a change from home. Isn't it?"

I sort of nod.

"Imagine," he says. "The entire world covered with this. Glaciers on the land, pack ice on the seas. Everywhere. And that was just a few centuries ago! Tempest was a different world, and it's changed that fast!"

"Imagine," says the woman.

We live on a big warm island in the middle of the largest sea. We had to fly almost an hour to get to where we started walking this morning, and we'll have to walk for days just to get back to our starting place. Says Father.

"Let's go take a look," he says.

"Can we?" she says.

I look at the rocks and the steep slope.

"We'll be careful," he promises, touching me on the shoulder. Then he asks, "Don't you want to see what's buried in the ice?"

I sort of nod.

"Tired, are you?"

"No," I say.

"Your legs hurt?"

I say, "No," but I can feel them.

He waits for a minute, then laughs. "We'd better hurry. That glacier's going to melt away."

Our pack is tethered to him. It floats after him like a huge lumpy balloon, humming softly as he walks down the slope. The woman follows him and the pack. She goes partway, then stops and looks back. She asks if I'm coming.

I don't answer.

"Help me get down," she says.

I start climbing downhill. My hands are still in my pockets, even when I start to slide. Rocks and gravel are moving under my boots. But I don't feel anything. This isn't scary or fun, or anything. I watch myself slide past the woman, then past Father, and when I finally stop at last I can barely hear them shouting. The wind blows so hard that I have to bend forward to stand, and I can almost taste the ice in my mouth, hard and sharp and old.

TEMPEST HAS A WEIRD SUN.

It burns dull and cold, then bright and hot, then back again, and I don't know why. What I know is that for as long as people have lived here, it's been summertime. Maybe tomorrow the sun will turn cold again. Maybe in a thousand years. Nobody knows. If it happens tomorrow, then we'll have to go back up to the starships and leave. That would be weird, and fun. Sometimes that's all I think about. I picture the glaciers coming, moving fast as rivers, and there's not even time to take clothes or anything. We have to run out of our big house, and the blue ice crushes everything in a minute. Which isn't how it would be, I know. Not fast like that. But that's how I keep seeing it. Over and over. Again and again.

"LOOK AT THIS," SAYS FATHER.

We're under a bulging chunk of the glacier, down beside the white water, and Father points at a block of ice. I see something inside it. Father pulls the pick from his belt and smacks the ice once. Carefully.

The woman turns to me. "Isn't this fascinating?"

"It's an animal," says Father. Sunshine has softened the extra hard ice, but he still has to use the pick's sharp end. A chunk tumbles down. "A bird!" He stretches and pulls out something leathery and smooth. It looks like the Tempest birds back home, only it's oily. That oil helps protect them, I remember.

Father hands it to me.

I feel weird. How long was the bird buried in the ice, riding down the mountainside? It's rolled up in a ball now, a little bit of its head tucked under a stiff wing. The wings look pretty chewed up by the ice. The one eye showing is closed. The bird isn't cold in my bare hands, and I know what that means. Only I keep thinking it should feel cold and perfectly dead.

"Let Yun see it," Father says.

She takes it with both hands and says, "Poor dear," and holds the bird to her face. Then she sets it on a sunny black rock and steps back. After a minute the wings start pulling apart, and she asks me, "Did you see that?"

When the winters come, life on Tempest lets itself freeze. I learned everything about it in school. Special organs make fancy chemicals that do nothing but protect them. The snow surrounding them turns into a strong shell of perfect ice. Their meat can stay frozen for thousands and thousands of years. Then they wake. It's like waking up after the deepest sleep possible, or coming back from the dead. Every land animal is that way. The prettiest little bird is tougher than any person. That's what I'm thinking when Yun says, "Its eyes are open! Look!"

Their meat can stay frozen for thousands and thousands of years. Then they wake.

I bend down. The black eye doesn't blink, but it seems alive. Does it see me? It's been sleeping since before we came to Tempest, safe inside its ice, and now we're the very first things it sees.

Is it scared? I wonder.

I bet it is.

I put my face even closer, and growl.

MOTHER WAS ALWAYS SCARED. I CAN'T REMEMBER her otherwise. She would cry when Father went to work, begging him to be careful. And Father would laugh, telling her that the robots did the dangerous work, not him, and besides, nothing was more boring than the flat floor of the sea. Then he would wink at me and promise to bring home a piece of the seafloor as a gift. Would I like that?

"But you'll be careful, won't you?" Mother wouldn't stop asking until he nodded, telling her:

"Absolutely. Aren't I always?!"

Then after he'd leave, she would turn to me. She would hold me and squeeze, saying, "I know I look silly. And I'm proud of your father. He's helping make our little colony richer. Strong and safe."

I would nod into her shoulder, saying, "I know."

"I know you do." But she never sounded sure about anything. "I just get little worries sometimes. I'm that sort of person. Be patient with me, Civ. Please? Of course you will be. Of course."

I'M THE ONE WHO FINDS THE SURUS. I'M WALKING AROUND A PILE OF cold stones when I see it stuck inside the glacier. Then Father follows me, splashing in the white water. "What do you have?" he asks. Then his voice changes. He makes himself laugh, then shouts at Yun. "Come see this! See what Civ found!"

All I can do is stand and stare.

Yun splashes all the way, then stops and says, "It's got to be a surus."

Father touches the melting ice where it's thinnest. One paw covers the face, big as my whole chest, three toes each with a long slicing claw. The rest of the monster is too big and too close to see all at once. Armor plates cling to its back and sides, just like the suruses in the zoo. They are very strong, and when they want to be, they're fast. They hunt the largest animals on Tempest. Once or twice they've even killed people. Haven't they?

I start to breathe faster.

"Be quiet," jokes Father. "We don't want to wake him."

Yun sort of laughs, then says, "I think it's lovely."

I touch the ice for myself.

"Should we worry?" she asks.

Father shakes his head, making a face. "No. We're fine."

I know that face. He would use it with my mother, telling her not *to* worry.

After a little minute, he says that we should be going. "There's a good place for camping, but we need to start. Soon."

I don't want to go anywhere.

Father grabs Yun around the waist and calls to me.

"In a minute," I tell him.

I feel Father's eyes. Then he turns and takes her away, saying, "Don't be long." They disappear behind the rocks. I'm alone. I have a toy pick on my belt. With its sharp point, I give the ice a few whacks. A big chunk drops free. Suddenly, without even stretching, I can touch the bare paw. It doesn't feel warm or cold, only rough and very old. The claws are almost white. I'm thinking how it would be to take a claw to school and show it to my friends, letting them hold it. Then it's as if I'm not thinking. All at once I smack the paw with my the dull end of my pick. I don't swing hard at first. But the surus can't get me. It can't do anything to me. So I use both hands and the sharp end, working hard at it. It takes me forever to realize that I'm angry. That's how I'm feeling, and I don't know when it started. The pick cuts into the paw and the toes. I can just hear Father shouting for me. But I keep hitting it, trying to knock that damned claw free. "Will you hurry up?" he calls from downstream. The claw is stuck tight, but I'm too angry to quit. With my arms and shoulders and legs, I give that paw another smack, between two toes, and a cool gray blood starts to ooze.

Now I feel weak and weird.

I halfway wash the pick in the cold water and put it back on my belt, my face suddenly warm. The paw has a huge gouge in it, but it's as if someone else did it. I didn't do anything. I'm both scared and brave, staring into the deep blue ice. An eye is watching me. A huge black-as-black-can-be eye. It stares right through me, even after I turn away. I'm feeling it as I splash along. The water is cold enough to reach through my sealed boots, but I barely notice my aching toes. I barely see Father marching toward me. He's staring too. "What were you doing? Didn't you hear me?"

"No."

He says, "No?" and follows me back to shore.

"Illie," says the woman.

"Look at me," he says.

"Illie?" she says.

Then he says, "What?"

She tells him, "Nothing. Never mind."

I don't feel scared anymore, but I'm still angry. I hate them, and I won't talk. I promise myself that I won't say anything.

Father shakes his head. "Come on. We've got to go."

Yun smiles at me, then at nothing. I walk straight past her. I won't look at her face, I tell myself. Ever. And Father is saying, "Civ? Son? Son?"

STAIRS CURL UP THROUGH THE MIDDLE OF OUR HOUSE. THEY ARE VERY fancy, made of cut black stone and cold metals from the bottom of the sea. Mother tripped on those stairs, fell and died. Our house computer watched her fall and couldn't do anything. She broke her neck and died before our autodoc could help her. Father was home from work. He came to school and made me sit down, then said, "It's nobody's fault. It was an accident." He told me how it had happened. She struck just so; a one-in-a-trillion accident, he said. Then he was crying. He couldn't stop crying, and what I remember best is being embarrassed. I wasn't sad or even angry yet. Just embarrassed. Then he looked past me, saying, "The irony."

I didn't understand.

"Wasting all that fear on me," he said, "and she trips and dies at home." Then he put his hands over his face. All I could do is watch him. Then after a while I felt empty and a little cold, and I discovered that I'd been crying for a long while, too.

OUR TENT IS SET WHERE THE GROUND IS FLAT, SHARP TEMPEST GRASS standing around us and no wood for a fire. The mountains seem taller and closer, and the air is cold as soon as the sun drops out of sight. I have to turn on my clothes to warm up.

Yun will sleep on the other side of Father.

She climbs inside her weigh-nothing bed and undresses. Her covers open up for a moment and I can see is the skin of her back and the bumps of her bones moving under the skin. Then she rolls over and smiles, saying, "Good night," and I can tell she's wondering about me. I just know. I look at her face, thinking she is ugly. Her shiny hair goes everywhere and tangles, and her face is dirty and tired.

Father tells me, "Sleep well." Then he kisses Yun on her big ugly mouth, whispering something that makes both of them laugh.

I keep very still, feeling the ground and matted grass under me. I won't sleep. I don't like this place and I'm not comfortable and nobody can make me even shut my eyes.

The water from the glacier runs through a nearby gorge. I can't help but listen to it. Then I shut my eyes because I want them shut, and I sleep. When I wake up I need to pee. But I'll have to climb from my warm bed and go outside, peeing in the cold. I'm sore and tired, and I can feel the darkness, and I don't want to go. That's what I'm thinking when I hear it. The sound. It's closer than the running water. I hear something coming through the tall grass. Then I can't hear it. Suddenly my eyes are wide open, and I'm lying absolutely still, holding my breath, feeling a knot pushing at my breastbone, and when I finally have to breathe, I do it quickly, always listening.

The intruder is walking beside the tent. I hear it again, close and huge, its long legs slipping through the grass. And I feel like I'm lying here all alone. Nobody can help me. I keep wishing that the river would quit so I could hear better. I feel hot and weak, hurting where I need to pee. I carefully touch myself, my eyes staring up at the dark round ceiling. A surus could slice through any tent. Its healthy paw could beat me to mush, and those awful long claws would slash my body apart. I couldn't do anything but scream. I should scream now, I keep thinking. But all I can do is lay perfectly still, knowing the surus is waiting outside — the same surus that was buried in the ice — and it has come looking for me.

For a million years, I listen to the water slipping over rocks, wearing them smooth. In my mind's eye, I see the armored surus holding its bloody paw out in the cold night air. I see everything; it feels perfectly real. Slipping my hands up over my eyes, I breathe between my palms, waiting for the first blow. Then it suddenly starts to get light outside, sunshine slipping between my fingers. And the surus still hasn't moved, still waiting.

Yun jerks and comes awake. She sees me and whispers, "Good morning, Civ." I say nothing. She dresses with her back to me and Father still asleep. "Shhh!" she tells me. Then she climbs out of bed, crawling to the door and unfastening it.

The surus will kill her; I know it and I'm scared by how happy I feel because of it.

Saying nothing, I imagine the monster tensing, its teeth and white claws shining. I watch Yun's rump and her short thick legs as she climbs outside. Then she farts, saying, "Excuse me," and halfway laughing.

I'm breathing fast, my heart huge and thundering.

She stands slowly. She turns in a slow circle, watching the scenery, and after a long moment I realize that nothing is going to happen. The surus slipped away while I was listening to the water, and nobody heard it but me.

AFTER MY MOTHER DIED, FOR A LONG WHILE AFTER, I WAS REMARKable. Important. Almost famous. Strangers would tell me how they were sorry for me and my father. Accidents happened, and who could say why? My friends were always my friends, letting me pick our games, then taking me early for the teams. And I was always right, too. About everything Everyone wanted to agree with me, and some-

times I forgot why. I'd catch myself thinking about Mother as if she were alive. I was telling her what a good time I was having... and then I would stop what I was doing, feeling angry and sick to forget something so important.

Sometimes Father talked to her at night. He could talk for hours, and I would lay awake and listen. He was angry at her for breaking her neck. He was lonely and sad and he couldn't raise the boy by himself. She had abandoned him and me. Why? Did he ever give her any reason to do this awful thing to them?

We were eating dinner one night, and in a serious voice, Father said something about having fun. What we needed, he said, was a vacation. Some kind of adventurous journey. Didn't that sound good?

I said, "I guess so."

And he nodded and tried to smile, looking into his plate as if it were a puzzle. He was trying to figure out our dinner, and it only looked as if his face was smiling.

I SEARCH THROUGH THE LONG GRASS. IT'S MATTED IN PLACES; SOMEthing big could have stood or sat here. A surus, maybe. Then I walk down to the river and pee, the pain turning nice and warm. I pull my pick from my belt, and after looking hard at it, I drop it into the running water. The surus is watching me. I feel its big eyes glaring at me from the mountainside. The eyes follow me back to camp. I don't have the pick anymore. It's gone now. "I didn't hurt you," I whisper. "The pick did, and it's in the river."

We eat breakfast and pack and leave.

Father acts angry. Yun watches him, asking if he slept well, and he grunts before saying, "Pretty much." We're following a little trail and the valley. At one place we find a big brown animal standing in the grass. It has a long stupid face and tons of armor, and the stupid face chews until we're close. Then it snorts hard and trots away.

That's not what I heard last night. The animal is too clumsy and it breathes too much.

"How do you feel?" Father asks me.

I watch the grass, saying, "Okay."

"Okay isn't good."

"I know." What can I say?

"Are we walking too fast?"

"No."

"Did you sleep well?"

I say, "Yes."

He doesn't speak. He glances at Yun before looking back at me, telling me, "I understand," with a soft voice.

What does he mean?

He coughs and says, "The terrain is tough on everyone."

I say nothing.

He tries smiling. I'm suppose to feel better now. He pulls off his first shirt, warning me, "It's going to be hot today. We'll be losing altitude from here on." Then he walks away, towing our pack after him. And while I watch the back of his head, something is watching me. I feel it like I did when I was by the water, only it's worse. It's awful. All I can think is that when the surus attacks, I hope it kills me quickly. For some reason, I think it won't matter so much, if it just happens fast.

I USED TO LOOK AT PICTURES OF MOTHER. FLAT ONES AND HOLOS; MOVing and not. I would put them into my bedroom walls and the air, and to make her more real, I would play her voice. Then Father would knock and come inside with his face strange. Wrong. Tired and wanting to be angry. Sometimes he told me to study or get into bed. Sometimes he would just leave again, saying nothing. Then after a while he stopped coming into my room. Even when it was just me in there.

Father was the one who should have died. Not Mother. She worried about him, not the other way around, and it wasn't fair. I would think that way until I felt awful for thinking it. Then as punishment, I wouldn't let myself watch Mother, sometimes for days, forgetting little things about her face and voice, and feeling sick for forgetting.

I would make her huge in my walls, seeing every pore and little line in her face.

I never got this close to her when she was alive, I realized. Her eyes were as big as faces, and dead, and they kept staring at me, seeing nothing at all.

GREENISH BLACK TEMPEST TREES GROW ALONG THE RIVER, THEN spread out through the valley, turning into a real forest.

I'm thinking that in that shade anything could hide.

Sometimes I start to limp, not even aware that I'm doing it. Other times I hear the surus filling its lungs and clicking its teeth, and why doesn't anyone else hear it? Because they won't listen. Father and Yun hold hands and whisper to each other, seeing nothing. I imagine them fooling around while I'm being killed. The surus takes a swipe at me from the shadows, breaking my neck, and Father hears nothing. He has to come back to find me. I picture how he would be. Angry, then worried. Then he finds me lying dead on the trail, blood everywhere, and he collapses. He weeps and screams, and that makes me smile. For the rest of the day I can't think of anything else.

"Where's your pick?"

We're eating dinner. We have a fire tonight, a large and deliciously warm fire, and Father is looking across the flames, waiting.

"I lost it," I tell him.

"When?"

"I lost it. I don't know when."

He says, "How did you lose it?"

Yun stops eating, looking up at him.

"Answer me, Civ."

"It fell in the river," I admit. "This morning."

He breathes before saying, "I bought our equipment just for this trip." He's angry in the worst way, working to keep himself quiet. "Where in the river? Do you know?"

"Illit?" says Yun.

He doesn't seem to hear her.

She says, "It's just a pick!"

"I know," says Father. To me. "You want to make everything as difficult as possible. Don't you?" He sets his plate on the ground and studies the fire, shaking his head all the time. "Don't you?"

"This isn't important," says Yun.

I wish she would shut up. I hate her and wish the surus had pounced on her this morning. Not to kill her, but just to make her hurt.

"Take my pick." She stands and brushes her butt clean, then makes a show of handing it to me. "Go on."

I don't want it.

"Don't be silly," she says, trying to giggle.

Father says, "He'll just lose it, too."

"Nonsense. I trust Civ."

I have to take the stupid thing. I don't know what else to do.

Father chews his dinner in little bites, watching us without watching us. Yun sits beside me, smiling and pretending that we're friends. We're a team working against Father, and maybe the whole world, too. That's how she acts. "You and me," she says, and Father throws his dinner into the fire, muttering something about not being the goddamn villain here.

Yun's pick is like mine, only bigger. The soft handle is shaped for her hand, and the sharp end glitters with freshly made diamonds.

I slip it onto my belt, deciding to give it back later.

If the surus doesn't kill either of us first.

ONE NIGHT FATHER BROUGHT HOME A NEW FRIEND. HE FOUND MUSIC for her, then made drinks, and they tried to dance. I was supposed to be asleep. Over the music, I could hear them talking. Father talked about the accident and his sadness. But he shouldn't have talked about those things. Those things belonged only to us. And it was horribly wrong for that woman to be in our house. I wanted to go down and tell her to go away and leave us alone.

I STAY AWAKE INTO THE NIGHT, WAITING.

Yun's pick is squarely on my chest, one of my hands curled around the sticky warm handle, ready for anything. They think I'm sleeping. Father pulls closer to Yun, then looks back at me. I can see him

through my squinting eyes. Then they're kissing and moving. Are they making love? I imagine it both ways. Then they're quiet and very still, their breathing as smooth and together as possible.

Half of the tent is mine. I can stretch out and not touch anyone.

I nearly sleep, my eyes shutting and my body starting to float. I can't help it. Then the surus is beside me. I hear it outside the tent, very close, and my eyes jerk open. The wind is louder than the water tonight. Listening to the wind, I can hear something breathing. It's a slow wet sound, strong and patient. Grasping the pick with both hands, I stare straight up. Tempest's moons make our tent glow, and through the ceiling I can see tree branches and shaggy leaves bending and blowing.

"I'm sorry," I whisper, and nothing happens.

I say, "I apologize," with a clear voice. "I just wanted a claw, something to show to my friends. And you were frozen. I thought you wouldn't feel anything ... "

Father moves inside his bed, then Yun moves.

"Just don't hurt them," I plead. "Please?"

Nothing happens. Except I don't hear the breathing anymore. The surus could have slipped away while I was talking, maybe. But to be safe, I keep still for a tremendously long time, counting my heartbeats and touching the sharp diamonds. And finally I'm so tired that I shut my eyes and fall asleep with both hands and the pick still on my chest, weighing down on me in a way that feels almost good.

FATHER BROUGHT HOME A SECOND WOMAN. This was the one before Yun. They spent the night in his bedroom, and I met her in the morning. Everyone was supposed to eat and be friendly. She told me that I was cute, and she'd heard a lot about me. She made all sorts of bad jokes, trying to make me laugh. I wouldn't. I didn't let myself even blink. Then she asked Father, "Why doesn't he like me? What's the matter with me?"

"He's having a tough time adapting," said Father. "He was very close to his mother."

"So were you, and you're over it."

Father said nothing.

"Oh, shit," she growled.

The woman visited for several more nights, and I would stare at her every time I could. I didn't laugh at her jokes or blink or even talk. Both of them tried to make me talk, but I wouldn't. Then they had a fight one night, and she left for the last time. She had to come past my door to get outside, and I watched her crying and Father trailing behind her. Then he came back and stared at me, not quite stepping into my room, asking, "Are you happy?" But I was better than happy. I had a power inside me, something I never suspected. My blood felt hot and my skin wet, and I couldn't stop smiling into my pillows.

I'M THE LAST TO WAKE AND THE ONLY ONE LEFT IN THE TENT. FATHER and Yun are cooking breakfast. I hear them and smell the morning fire, smoky and sweet. Climbing outside, I pull on my shirts, and with everyone watching, I stick the pick on my belt. Then I walk circles around the tent, hunting for tracks. Nothing on the ground looks like claw marks, and strangely, I'm disappointed. I walk to the exact place where the surus was standing — where I plainly heard it breathing — and while I'm standing there, a little breeze starts up. A long flap of extra fabric wiggles, making a certain sound. Then I straighten. I'm very still and thoughtful.

Moving the flap with my hands, in different ways, I make the same sounds that I'd heard on both nights. At first I feel stupid. But later, walking toward the morning fire, I feel wonderful. Suddenly I'm weightless and happy and fine. Double portions of breakfast aren't enough. Yun smiles, saying, "Aren't you the hungry gentleman?" I smile, too. And through the rest of the morning I'm marveling at how real everything had seemed when I believed it, and now it's all just silly.

I promise myself not tell anyone, of course.

At lunch, sitting with Father, I ask about the surus. Does he think it's somewhere close?

Father looks at the trees, tall and almost black and hiding nothing today. "Oh, no," he says, shaking his head. "It'll take days for it to melt out of that ice. We won't see it. Too bad."

We camp early. Yun talks Father into stopping while there's light, and I help with the tent and firewood. I want them to see me helping. Father isn't quite smiling, and I can tell he's going to say something. But then Yun asks, "Who wants to swim?"

I give that paw another smack, between two toes, and a cool gray blood starts to ooze.

She means in the river, in the frigid water. I'd rather not, thank you. But the others change into swimsuits, and I climb up on a tall stone where I can sit and watch. My butt is in a little bowl, and I use a shirt as a pillow. I fall asleep in a minute. Then Yun wakes me, saying, "I didn't know you were napping. Sorry." She's climbed out of the river, dripping wet and cold. "Would you like to wade in with me?"

Father is standing out on a gravel island, tiny against all that water.

"Okay," I agree.

After changing in the tent, I walk barefoot down to the water. Yun is up to her ankles, pretending it isn't cold. The river is bright and wide but not milky white anymore. Father has left the island, wading into deeper water now. Watching him, I suddenly remember something. "I had a dream just now," I tell Yun.

"What about?"

"Tempest was getting cold again, and people went up into the mountains. Everyone did. We knew where to lie down in the snow and sleep. The blue ice covered us. We stayed buried for a long time. Forever, almost. Then the sun got warm and the ice was melting, and I was just waking up when I woke up here."

She nods and says, "That's interesting, Civ."

"I wish I was that way."

"Do you?"

"Sure." We're wading into the river. The current isn't too strong, and the cold barely hurts. "It would be neat," I tell Yun. "We wouldn't have to leave Tempest during its winters. We'd just roll up into balls and ride inside the glaciers, waiting for everything to turn green again."

She says nothing.

I'm deeper than knee-deep, and my feet look far away.

"Maybe we're already like that," she says. "In a different way, I mean."

I don't know what she means. "We aren't like suruses," I tell her. "When we freeze inside ordinary ice, we die."

"True."

"The starships have cold-sleep chambers. Is that what you mean?"

"Not really." She looks at me, then past me. "There's more than one kind of winter. That's what I mean, Civ."

Where's Father? I start thinking. All I see is moving water and blue skies.

"And there's more than one kind of summer, too," Yun adds, putting a hand against my back and pushing just a little, just to steer me along □



A Charity Appeal

Dear [Name Here],

Do you believe in dinosaurs?

Of course, we all know that dinosaurs once ruled the earth. Everywhere you looked there were different kinds of dinosaurs.

Friendly Brontosauruses munching on giant palm trees.

Graceful Pterodactyls soaring through the sky.

The immense Diplodocus – who might weigh fifty tons or more – and his fearful enemy, Tyrannosaurus Rex!

These giant reptiles were not mythical creatures, like unicorns and dragons. They once actually walked the Earth – and they may still be doing so today!

Oh yes, I know – scientists will tell you that the dinosaurs have been extinct for millions of years, ever since the so-called "Jurassic" era. But scientists have been wrong before.

The only way to find out once and for all is to send a scientific expedition in search of any dinosaurs who may be left. If they are there, then they must be the most endangered of all endangered species – and something should be done to help them.

The Bald Eagle – that proud symbol of the American spirit – has been brought back from the brink of extinction. Surely we can do the same for any surviving dinosaurs. They are living now, I would imagine, in some inaccessible valley in the Andes. Or perhaps on a remote island of the South Seas.

Perhaps the winged Pterodactyls have evolved so that they now live completely out of sight, like bats inhabiting dark caves, only emerging from their immense caverns on moonless nights when they cannot be seen.

Wouldn't it be wonderful to be able to visit a Dinosaur Zoo, such as the one imagined in the movie, *Jurassic Park*?

That movie was fiction, of course. But it need not remain fiction – if you will join with me and the other founding members of The Children's Fund to Save the Dinosaurs.

Together, we can make it happen.

Here's what the Fund plans to do with the money you send.

- We will rent a small passenger liner and mount an expedition to explore small, sparsely inhabited islands in the South Seas.

BY THOMAS M. DISCH

■ We will send teams of qualified photographers and paleontologists – scientists with special knowledge of dinosaurs – to little known areas of Africa, Australia, and South America where dinosaurs were once as common as elephants and kangaroos today!

■ A special observation post will be established on the shore of Loch Ness in Scotland, which will be manned around the clock by members of The Children's Fund to Save the Dinosaurs.

But none of these things can happen without your support, [Name Here]. Time is running out for the dinosaurs. There cannot be very many left. We need to begin looking now!

To become a Founding Member of the Fund, send your contribution, in the accompanying postage-paid envelope, to The Children's Fund to Save the Dinosaurs in Boca Raton, Florida.

(For administrative reasons the minimum contribution we can accept is $100.)

To show our appreciation for your contribution you will be sent a Lifetime Membership in The Children's Fund to Save the Dinosaurs and a scroll, suitable for framing, declaring that [Your Name] is a Founding Member of the Fund, entitled to share in all the benefits of membership.*

Patrons who make a contribution of $1,000 or more will be able to name the first dinosaurs we discover! Maybe you'd like to call your dinosaur after a favorite TV personality, like Gumby. Or maybe you'd like him to share your own name, [Name Here]. It will be up to you to decide!*

Patrons will also be put on the waiting list to man our Loch Ness observation post, as soon as construction is completed.

We need all the help we can get. The skeptics are out there already who will tell you that dinosaurs are extinct. Don't believe them. Skeptics just like them insisted for year that UFOs were nothing but meteors. More than 75% of all Americans now know better than that!

Your friends at school and work can help. Ask them to pitch in. Explain the goals of the Fund. Show them pictures of dinosaurs. And don't take No for an answer!

You can also support the Fund by writing to your Senator or Representative in Washington, D.C., urging their support for The Children's Fund to Save the Dinosaurs. The government needs to know there is grass-roots support for our endeavor. When they see how much popular support we've got, the sky's the limit. Don't forget it was the government who sent the first astronauts to the Moon.

What do you think is more important, [Name Here] – a return trip to the Moon? Or a chance to save the lives of the last dinosaurs on Earth? The choice is yours.

Yours sincerely,

Thomas M. Disch

Thomas M. Disch, President
The Children's Fund to Save the Dinosaurs

*Offer void where prohibited by law.

Barclay Shaw and the Art of the Unexpected

LIVING SPACE

BY ALAN DEAN FOSTER

Some artists specialize in still lifes, others in portraits. Many favor abstractions while other prefer sea scenes, or photorealistic depictions of animals, or sweeping vistas of birds in flight. There are artists who paint nothing but flowers in vases, or food on tables, as well as those who build their compositions out of found objects.

Barclay Shaw does landscapes. Of the soul.

Anyone who looks at a Barclay Shaw conjuration of paint, ink, charcoal and computer bytes and sees nothing more than the illustration of a scene from a book has a





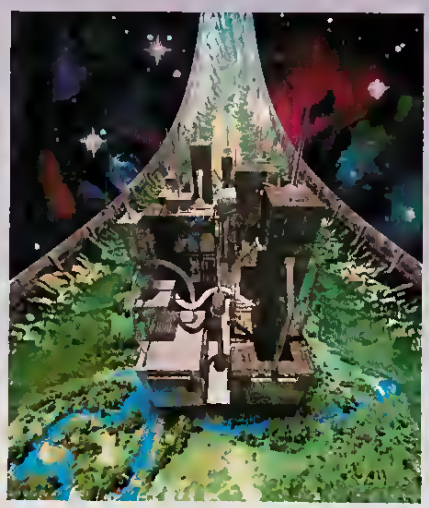


ABOVE: In Frederik Pohl's The World at the End of Time, *the artist exaggerated perspective to emphasize the vastness of space. LEFT: Barclay Shaw's tortured depiction of a fallen astronaut from Alan Dean Foster's novel* Sentenced to Prism *earned the superlatives the author used in this essay.*

problem, not with art, but with seeing. There are, however, shortcuts to understanding available to the perceptually challenged. When viewing a Bierstadt, you first notice the light. With a Frazetta, you are drawn instantly to the exaggerated musculature. Dali is all about connections, and Margritte about thought.

Barclay Shaw is not difficult to unlock. Just look at the eyes.

Now, any competent artist can paint eyes. Iris colored thusly, corneas painted so, brows and lashes added like frosting on a cake. But painting what lies *behind* our translucent oculars requires more than the ability to draw circles and add color. It demands that the artist consider his subject as something more than dabs of paint enclosed by lines. It requires that he envision his invention as alive. And to give



the image of a being life, to create something that does not simply appear to exist but that provides the illusion of interacting with the viewer, you must first look at the eyes.

It doesn't matter whether Barclay is portraying humans, or animals, or aliens. The passions communicated through the eyes of his inventions are manifold and illuminating.

Passing beyond the eyes of the central character or characters, the first thing you notice about a Barclay Shaw painting is the composition. Sharp, sometimes violent angles are juxtaposed against soft curves, important shapes are off-set to top, bottom, and sides, yet everything comes together seamlessly to create not merely a cohesive artistic whole, but a synthesis gravid with dramatic impetus. There is no ignoring a Barclay

Shaw canvas. It does not ask that you eye it, or pay attention to detail, or respond emotionally to content. It *demands*.

Barclay accomplishes this through the remarkable trick of combining apparently static elements in such a way that the composition seems fraught with movement. A sensuous, elfin woman sits by the sea before a golden harp. Her fingers appear to dance over the strings while her arms flow free and loose from her shoulders. The angle of her head suggests a recent bending, the upthrust position of her knee the rising of a leg, the tilt of an eyebrow a recent blink. She is not sitting in front of a harp — she is playing it. Close by, the sea ebbs, courses, surges and rolls. Clouds in the sky drift and change position in the mind's eye if not in the canvas itself. Even the sunlight



FAR LEFT: Barclay Shaw paid a visit to Ringworld, one of SF's most famed pieces of real estate, with his cover to Larry Niven's The Ringworld Throne. *ABOVE: This unused cover image, incorporating elements from several Ray Bradbury stories, was meant to appear on a limited edition of* The Bradbury Chronicles *that was never published. LEFT: Paula E. Downing's 1990 novel* Rinn's Star *gave the artist the chance to portray an alien culture.*



seems to be in motion, streaming and changing, blanketing every other element in the composition with a smattering of photons.

All this is accomplished with paint, dried on a flat piece of canvas or art board.

An array of alien shapes cluster around a human figure. All are motionless, yet all appear to be moving. Eyeing the composition one has the feeling that if you glanced away for a second, for just a second, this character would dart to its right, another to its left, a third would duck down and the fourth would turn, stare directly at you, and speak. There is much more at work here than a competent representation of human and non-human figures.

Barclay has the skill to imbue his figures with an animation that exists only in the mind and not on paper. It's an astonishing trick, this ability to suggest movement where none is physically taking place. His cover painting for a tome by Harlan Ellison depicts little more than a guitar with a satanic face sculpted upon it. But the face laughs, and challenges, the guitar seems ready to sing, and there is that striking sense of movement attached to the whole composition.

Because of the way Barclay has presented it. Instead of a stock, face-on, flat view of the guitar, its stem is pointed away from us and the back of the guitar angled on our direction. The instrument is not offered up for our to view or study: it's thrust directly in our face. This is not how we expect to see the guitar, and therefore all of our preconceived perceptions about how it should look are forcibly altered. Having jarred us out of our viewing complacency, Barclay proceeds to give us a new and unexpected way of observing an otherwise familiar object.

And ain't that what art is all about?

Never the expected. Barclay is constantly pushing himself to find different ways of viewing: new angles, strikingly unexpected colors, unanticipated shapes, stark devices for framing his and the authors' ideas. Layers withing layers.

He has painted a series of portraits illustrating characters from a book, depicted on the cover as a series of overlapping playing cards. Instead of being presented in the forefront of the composition, the human protagonist of a story stands looking bored and distant while a soft visaged alien takes center stage. The combining of computer-generated imagery with traditional ink and paint puts

Barclay on the cutting edge of contemporary illustration. An illustration that combines painted portraiture with three-dimensional wooden sculpture supplies a depth even the computer has yet to duplicate.

I haven't even touched on Barclay's other skills, most notably his talent for pure sculpture and for the fashioning of items of functional furniture that are in themselves works of art. It is this ability to visualize not in two dimensions, which is all that is required for traditional illustration, but in three, that contributes to the sense of wondrous real-world depth that Barclay imparts to his creations. Viewing a Shaw painting one experiences the sensation of not merely looking *at* a scene from a book, but *into* one. You don't view a Barclay Shaw illustration: you enter it.

I envy those of you who are entering for the first time. □



ABOVE LEFT: Work in Progress *is a mixed media construction, a work made of equal parts painting and sculpture. ABOVE: The 1991 Bantam Books anthology* Full Spectrum III *combined images from several different stories into a single composition. LEFT:* Cat's Gambit, *by Leslie Gadallah, allowed Shaw to portray two distinct alien races.*

Franz Kafka awoke one morning from an uneasy sleep to discover that he had been transformed into a mild-mannered reporter for a great metropolitan newspaper...

"Whatever advantage the future has in size, the past compensates for in weight . . . ." — *The Diaries of F. K.*

PALE LIGHT THE COLOR OF OLD STRAW TRODDEN BY uneasy cattle pooled from a lone streetlamp onto the greasy wet cobbles of the empty street. Feelers of fog like the live questing creepers of a hyperactive Amazonian vine twined around standards and down storm drains. The aged, petulant buildings lining the dismal thoroughfare wore the blank brick countenances of industrial castles. Some distance away, the bell of a final trolley sounded. A minute later, as if in delayed querulous counterpoint, a tower clock tolled midnight. A rat dashed in mad claw-clicking flight across the street.

Shortly after the tolling of the clock, a rivet-studded steel door opened in one of the factories, and a trickle of weary workers flowed out in spurts and ebbs, the graveyard shift going home. Without many words, and those few consisting of stale ritual phrases, the laborers apathetically trudged down the hard urban trail toward their shabby homes.

The path of many of the workers took them past the mouth of a dark alley separating two of the factories like a wedge in a log. None of the tired men and women took notice of two ominous figures crouched deep back in the alley's shadows like beasts of prey in the mouth of their burrow.

When it seemed the last worker had definitely passed, one of the gloom-cloistered lurkers whispered to the other. "Are you sure she's still coming?"

THE JACKDAW'S LAST CASE

BY PAUL DI FILIPPO

Illustration by Tom Simonton


SIMONTON 96

"Yeah, yeah, don't sweat it. She's always late for some reason. Maybe tossing the boss a quickie or something."

"You'd better be right, or our goose is cooked. We promised Madame Wu we'd bag her one last dame. And the boat for Shanghai leaves on the dot of two. *And* we still gotta get the baggage down to the dock."

"Don't get ants in your pants, fer chrissakes! Jesus, you'd think you'd never kidnapped a broad before! Ain't the white slavery racket a lot better'n second-story work?"

"I guess so. But I just got this creepy feeling tonight — "

"Well, keep it to yourself! You got the chloroform ready?"

"Sure, sure, I'm not gonna screw up. But there's something — "

"Quiet! I hear footsteps!"

Closer the lonely click-clack of a woman walking in heels sounded. A bare white arm and a skirted leg swung into the frame of the alley-mouth. Then the assailants were upon the unsuspecting woman, pinioning her arms, slapping an ether-drenched cloth to her face.

"Okay, she's out! You get her legs, I'll take her arms. Once we're in the jalopy, we're good as there — "

Suddenly the night was split by an odd cry, half avian, half human, a spine-tingling ululation ripe with sardonic, caustic derision.

The kidnappers dropped their unconscious burden to the pavement and began to tremble.

"Oh, shit, no! Not him!"

"Where the hell is he! Quick!"

"There! I see him! Up on the roof!"

Standing in silhouette on a high parapet loomed the enigmatic and fearsome bane of evildoers everywhere, a heart-stopping icon of justice and fair play.

The Jackdaw.

The figure was tall and cadaverous. On his head perched a wide-brimmed, split-crown felted hat. An ebony feathered cape, fastened around his neck, hung from his outstretched arms like wings. A cruel beaked raptor's mask hid the upper half of his face. From his uncovered mouth now burst again his piercing trademark cry, part caw, part madman's exultant defiance.

"Don't just stand there! Blast him!"

The frightened yeggs drew their pistols, took aim and snapped off several shots.

But the Jackdaw was no longer there.

Facing outward, the forgotten woman behind their backs, and swivelling nervously about like malfunctioning automata on a Gothic town-square barometer, the kidnappers strained their ears for the slightest sound of movement. Only the drip, drip, drip of condensing fog broke the eerie stillness.

"We did it! We scared off the Jackdaw! He ain't such hot shit after all!"

"Okay, quit bragging! We still gotta get this broad to the docks — "

"I think not, gentlemen."

The kidnappers swung violently around, teeth chattering. Bestriding the unconscious woman, the Jackdaw had twin pistols clutched in his yellow-gloved hands and trained on the quaking assailants. Before the thugs could react, the Jackdaw fired, his strange guns emitting not the flash and boom of gunpowder, but only a subtle *phut, phut.*

The kidnappers had time only to slap at the darts embedded in their necks before crumpling to the ground.

Within a trice, the Jackdaw had the men hogtied with stout cord unwrapped from around his waist. Picking up the girl and hoisting her in a fireman's carry over one shoulder, one gloved hand resting not unfamiliarly on her buttocks, the Jackdaw said, "A hospital bed will suit you better than a brothel's doss, *liebchen.* And I should still have time to meet that Shanghai-bound freighter. Altogether, this promises to be a most profitable night."

With this observation the Jackdaw plucked a signature feather from his cape and dropped it between the recumbent men. Then, with a repetition of his fierce cry, he was gone like the phantasm of a fevered brain.

WHEN MISTER FRANK KAFKA REACHED THE OFFICE OF HIS EMPLOYER at 1926 Broadway on the morning of July 3, 1925, he found the entire staff transformed from their normally staid and placid selves into a milling, chattering mass resembling a covey of agitated rooks, or perhaps the inhabitants of an invaded, ax-split termite colony.

Hanging his dapper Homburg on the wooden coatrack that stood outside the door to his private office, Kafka winced at the loud voices before reluctantly approaching the noisy knot formed by his co-workers. The center of their interest and discussion appeared to be that morning's edition of the *Graphic* , a New York tabloid that was the newest addition to the stable of publications owned by the very individual for whom they too labored — that is, under normal conditions. All labor seemed suspended now.

The clot of humanity appeared an odd multilimbed organism composed of elements of male and female accoutrements: starched detachable collars, arm garters, ruffled blouses, high-buttoned shoes. Employing his above-average height to peer over the shoulders of the congregation, Kafka attempted to read the large headlines dominating the front page of the newspaper. Failing to discern their import, he turned to address an inquiry to a woman who resolved herself as an individual on the fringes of the group.

"Millie, good morning. What's this uproar about?"

Millie Jansen turned to fix her interlocutor with sparkling, mischievous eyes. A young woman in her early twenties with wavy dark hair parted down the middle, she exhibited a full face creased with deep laugh lines. Today she was clad in a black rayon blouse speckled with white dots and cuffed at the elbows, as well as a long black skirt belted with a wide leather cincture.

"Why, Frank, I swear you live in another world! Haven't you heard yet? The streets are just buzzing with the news! It's that mysterious vigilante, the Jackdaw — he struck again last night!"

Standing in loomed the bane of

Kafka yawned ostentatiously. "Oh, is that all? I'm afraid I can't be bothered keeping current with the doings of every Hans, Ernst and Adolf who wants to take the law into his own hands. What did he accomplish this time? Perhaps he managed to foil the theft of an apple from a fruit-vendor's cart?"

"Oh, Frank!" Millie pouted prettily. "You're such a cynic! Why can't you show a little idealism now and then? If you really want to know, the Jackdaw broke up a white-slavery ring! Imagine — they were abducting helpless working girls just like me and shipping them to the Orient, where they would addict them to opium and force them into lewd, unnatural acts!"

Kafka smiled in a world-weary manner. "It all seems rather a short-sighted and unnecessary waste of time and effort on the part of these outlaw international entrepreneurs. Surely there are many women in town who would have volunteered for such a position. I counted a dozen on Broadway alone last night as I walked home."

Millie became serious. "You strike this pose all the time, Frank, but I know it's not the real you."

"Indeed, then, Millie, you know more about me than I do myself."

Kafka yawned again, and Millie studied him closely. "Didn't get much sleep last night, did you?"

"I fear not. I was working on my novel."

"*Bohemia* , isn't that the title? How's it going?"

"I draw the words as if out of the empty air. If I manage to capture one, then I have just this one alone and all the toil must begin anew for the next."

"Tough sledding, huh? Well, you can do it, Frank, I know it. Any-

body who can write that lonelyhearts column the way you do — well, you're just the bee's knees with words, if you get my drift." Millie laid a hand on the sleeve of Kafka's grey suitcoat. "Step aside, a minute, won't you, Frank? I — I've got a little something for you."

"As you wish. Although I can't imagine what it could be."

The pair walked across the large open room to Millie's desk. There, she opened a drawer and took out a small gaily wrapped package.

"Here, Frank. Happy birthday."

Kafka seemed truly touched, his self-composure disturbed for a moment. "Why, Millie, this is very generous. How did you know?"

"Oh, I happened to be rooting around in the personnel files the other day and a certain date and name just caught my eye. It's your forty-first, right?"

"Correct. Although I never imagined myself ever attaining this advanced age."

Millie smiled coyly. "You sure don't look that old, Frank."

"Even into my late twenties, I was still being mistaken for a teenager."

"Was that back in Prague?"

Kafka cocked his head alertly. "No. I left my native city in 1902, when I was only nineteen. That was the year my Uncle Lowy in Madrid took me under his wing and secured me a job with his employer, the Spanish railways."

"And that's what led to all those years of travelling the globe as a civil engineer, building railways?"

"Yes." Kafka fixed Millie with a piercing gaze. "Why this sudden inquisition, Miss Jansen? It seems purposeless and unwarranted."

"Oh, I don't know. I like you, I guess. I want to know more about you. Is that so strange? And you're so close-mouthed, it's a challenge. Even after two years of working almost side by side, I feel we hardly know each other. No, don't protest, it's true. Oh, I admit you contribute to the general office conversation, but never anything personal. Getting anything vital out of you is like pulling teeth."

Kafka seemed about to reply with some habitual rebuff, then hesitated as if summoning fresh words. "There is some veracity to your perceptions, Millie. But you must rest assured that the fault lies with me, and not yourself. Due to my early warped upbringing, I have been generally unfitted for regular societal intercourse. Oh, I put up a good facade, but most of the time I feel clad in steel, as if my arm muscles, say, were an infinite distance away from myself. It is only when — well, at certain times I feel truly human. Then, I have a feeling of true happiness inside me. It is really something effervescent that fills me completely with a light, pleasant quiver and that persuades me of the existence of abilities of whose nonexistence I can convince myself with complete certainty at any moment, even now."

Millie stood with jaw agape before saying, "Jiminy, Frank — that's deep! And see, it didn't hurt too much to share that with me, did it?"

Kafka sighed. "I suppose not, for whatever it accomplished. You must acknowledge that if I am not always agreeable, I strive at least to be bearable."

Millie threw her arms around Kafka, who stood rigid as a garden beanpole. "Don't worry, Frank! Everybody feels a little like a caged animal now and then!"

"Not as I do. Inside me is an alien being as distinctly and invisibly hidden as the face formed from elements of the landscape in a child's picture puzzle."

Releasing Kafka, Millie stepped back. "Gee, that *is* a weird way to feel, Frank. Well, anyhow, aren't you going to open your present?"

"Certainly."

Discarding the colored paper and bow, Kafka delicately opened the box revealed. From within a nest of excelsior, he withdrew a small carving.

"Very nice, Millie. A figurine for my desk, I presume."

"Do you recognize it?"

Kafka twirled the object, showing no emotion. "A bird of some sort, obviously. A crow?"

"A *jackdaw* , actually. How do you say that in Czech?"

"Why, something tells me you already know, Millie. Back home we say, *'kavka* .'"

Smiling as if she had just been awarded a trophy, Millie repeated, "'*Kavka* .'" Then, rather alarmingly, she flapped her arms, crowed softly and winked.

CLOSING HIS OFFICE DOOR GENTLY BEHIND HIM SO AS NOT TO MAKE A loud report that would disturb his acutely sensitive hearing, Kafka bestowed a long appraisal on his desk, where a Corona Model T typing machine reigned in midblotter like a machine-age deity. Wearily, he shook his head. Nothing good could be done on such a desk. There was so much lying about, it formed a disorder without proportion and without that compatibility of disordered things which otherwise made every disorder bearable.

Kafka set about cleaning up the mess. Soon he had a stack of unopened mail, one of interoffice memos, and another of miscellaneous documents. Finally he could truly work.

silhouette on a high parapet enigmatic and fearsome evildoers everywhere...

However, just as soon as he had positioned himself behind the writing machine, ivory-handled letter-opener in one hand and faintly perfumed envelope in another, a male shadow cast itself on the frosted glass of his door, followed by a tentative knock.

Sighing, Kafka urged entrance in a mild voice.

Carl Ross, the office boy, was a freckled youth whose perpetually ink-smeared face bore a constant smile of impish goodwill. "Boss wants you, Mister Frank."

"Very well. Did he say why?"

"Nope. He seemed a tad steamed though."

"Undoubtedly at me. Well, the fault is probably all mine. I shall not reproach myself, for shouted into this empty day it would have a disgusting echo. And after all, the office has a right to make the most definite and justified demands on me."

"Cripes, Mister Frank, why do you want to go and beat up on yourself like that for, before you even get called on the carpet? Let the Boss do it if he's going to. Otherwise, you're just going to suffer twice!"

Kafka stood and advanced to lay a hand on Carl's tousled head. "Good advice, Carl. Perhaps we should trade jobs. Well, there's no point putting this off. Let's go."

At the end of a long, blank corridor was a door whose gilt lettering spelled out the name of Kafka's employer: BERNARR MACFADDEN. Kafka knocked and was admitted with a gruff "Come in!".

Bernarr Macfadden — that prolific author, self-promoter, notorious nudist and muscleman, publishing magnate, stager of beauty contests, inventor of Physical Culture and the Macfadden Dietary System — was upside down. His head was firmly ensconced on a thick scarlet pillow with gold- braid trim placed against one wall of his large office, against which vertical surface his inverted body was braced.

In his expensive suit and polished shoes, his vibrant handsome mustachioed face suffused with blood, Macfadden reminded Kafka of some modern representation of the Hanged Man Tarot card, an evil omen one would not willingly encounter.

As if to reinforce Kafka's dire whimsy, Macfadden now bellowed, "Have a seat and hang in there, Frank! I'll be done in a couple of seconds!"

Kafka did as ordered. True to his words, in only a moment or two Macfadden broke his swami's pose, coiling forward in an deft somersault that brought him to his feet, breathing noisily.

"There! Now I can think clearly again! Sure wish I could get you to join in with me once in a while, Frank!"

"I appreciate your interest, sir. However, I have a nightly course of exercises of my own devising which keep me fit."

"Well, can't argue with success!" Macfadden snatched up a stoppered vacuum bottle from his desktop and gestured with it at Kafka. "Care for a glass of Cocomalt?"

"No, thank you, sir."

"No matter, I'll have one." Macfadden poured himself a glass of the chilled food-tonic. "Anyhow, I must confess you're looking mighty fit. You're following my diet rules though, aren't you?"

"Indeed."

"Good, good. You were on the road to goddamn ruin when you first applied for a job here. I can't believe you ever fell for Fletcherism! Chew every mouthful a dozen times! Hogwash! As long as you lay off the tobacco and booze, you'll be A-OK! Why, look at me!" Abruptly, Macfadden stripped off his coat, rolled back one sleeve, and flexed the bicep thus exposed. "I'm fifty-seven years young, and at the peak of health! A little grey at the temples, but that's just frost on the roof. The fire inside is still burning bright! You can expect the same, if you just stay the course!"

Kafka coughed in a diversionary manner. "As you say, sir. Uh, I believe you needed to speak to me about a work-related matter ... ?"

Macfadden grew solemn. He propped one lean buttock on the corner of his expansive desk. "That's right, son. It's about your column."

"So then. I assume that 'Ask Josephine' is losing popularity with the readers of *True Story*. Or perhaps you've had a specific complaint ... ?"

"No, no, no, nothing like that. Your copy's as popular as ever, and no one's complained. It's just that your advice to the readers is so — so eccentric! Always has been, but I just read the latest issue and, son — you're moving into some strange territory!"

"I'm afraid I don't see — "

"Don't see! Why, how do you justify this? 'Anxious in Akron' asks for your advice on whether she should have more than one child. Here's your reply in its entirety: 'The convulsive starting up of a lizard under our feet on a footpath in Italy delights us greatly, again and again we are moved to bow down, but if we see them at a dealer's by hundreds crawling over one another in confusion in the large bottles in which otherwise pickles are packed, then we don't know what to do.'"

"Very clear, I thought."

"Clear? It's positively lurid!"

Kafka smiled with his typical demure sardonicism . "A charge you yourself have frequently had levelled at your own writings, sir."

"Harumph! Well, yes, true. But hardly the same thing! What about this one? 'Pining in Pittsburgh' wants to know how she can get her reluctant beau to pop the question. Your counsel? 'The messenger is already on his way. A powerful, indefatigable man, now pushing with his right arm, now with his left, he cleaves a way for himself through the throng. If he encounters resistance he points to his breast, where the symbol of the sun glitters. The way is made easier for him than it would be for any other man. But the multitudes between him and you are so vast; their numbers have no end. If he could reach the open fields how fast he would fly, and soon doubtless you would hear the welcome hammering of his fists on your door. But he is still only making his way through the inner courts of a palace infinite in extent. If at last he should burst through the outermost gate — but never, never can that happen — the whole imperial capital would lie before him, the center of the world, crammed to bursting with its own sediment. Nobody could fight his way through there. But you sit at your window when evening falls and dream it to yourself.'"

For a space of time Kafka was silent. Then he said, "It's best, I think, not to raise false hopes ... ."

Macfadden slammed down the magazine from which he had been reading. "False hopes! My god, boy, that's hardly the issue here! With such mumbo-jumbo, who can even tell if you're talking about this planet or another one! I know the motto of our magazine is 'Truth is stranger than fiction,' but this kind of malarkey really beats the band!"

Kafka seemed stung. "The readers appear to take adequate solace from my parables."

"I'll grant you that if someone's heartsick enough they can find comfort in any old gibberish. But that's not what we're about at Macfadden enterprises. The plain truth plainly told! No flinching from hard facts, no mincing or obfuscation. If you can only keep that in mind, Frank!"

A transformative surge through him, rendering larger than

Rising to his feet, Kafka said, "I will do my best, sir. Although my nature is not that of other men."

Macfadden got up also, and put an arm around Kafka's shoulders. "That brings me to another point, son. You know I like to keep a fatherly eye on my employees and their home lives. And it has risen to my attention that you're becoming something of a reclusive loner, a regular hermit bachelor type. Now, take this advice of mine to heart, both as a stylistic example and on a personal level. You cannot work for yourself alone, and rest content. You need a satisfying love life, and the home and children with which it is sanctified. It is the stimulus of love that makes service divine. To work for yourself alone is cold, selfish and meaningless. You need a loved one with whom you can double your joys and divide your sorrows."

During this speech Macfadden had been escorting his subordinate to the exit. Now, opening the door, he slapped Kafka with hearty bonhomie on the back, sending the slighter man staggering forward a step or two.

"Have a yeast pill, son, and get back in the harness!"

Silently, Kafka accepted the offered tablet and departed.

Back in his office, Kafka deposited the yeast pill in a drawer containing scores of others. Then he picked up the envelope the slitting of which had been interrupted by his boss's summons and extracted its contents.

"Dear Josephine," the letter began. "I hardly know where to start! My sick, elderly parents are about to be evicted from our farm because they had a number of bad years and can't pay their loans, and my own job — our last hope of survival — could be in danger itself. It's my boss, you see. He has made improper advances toward me, advances I've modestly refused. Still, I get the impression that he won't respect my virtuous stand much longer, and I'll have to either

bend to his will or be fired! I've made myself sick with worry about this, can't sleep, can't eat, etc., until I almost don't care about anything anymore, just wish I could escape from it all somehow. Does this make me a bad daughter? Please help!"

Kafka rolled a sheet of paper into his typing machine. Attempting to keep Macfadden's advice in mind, he moved his fingers delicately over the keys.

"Don't despair, not even over the fact that you don't despair. Just when everything seems over with, new forces come marching up, and precisely that means that you are alive." Kafka paused, then added a codicil. "And if they don't, then everything is over with here, once and for all."

SEATED IN THE STUDY OF HIS FIFTH AVENUE APARTMENT AT A DESK THAT was the tidy twin to its office mate, with the dusk of another evening mantling his shoulders like a moleskin cape, Kafka composed with pen in their native German his weekly letter to his youngest and favorite sister, Ottla, now resident with her husband Joseph David in Berlin.

Dearest Ottla,

I am gratified to hear that you are finally feeling at ease in your new home and environs. The claws of our "little mother" Prague are indeed difficult to disengage from one's skin. Sometimes I envision all of Prague's more sensitive citizens as being metaphorically suspended from the city's towers and steeples on lines and flesh-piercing hooks, like Red Indians engaged in ritual excruciations. Although I myself have been a wandering expatriate for some two decades now, I still recall my initial disorientation, when Uncle Alfred took me under his wing and forcibly launched me on my globe-circling career. I think that my strong memories of Bohemia and my intense feelings for our natal city were what prevented me from settling down until recently. Although, truth be told, I soon came to enjoy my peripatetic mode of existence. The lack of close and enduring ties with other people was not unappealing, as were the frequent stimulating changes of scenery.

passed him somehow life.

Of course, all that changed after "The Encounter," which I have expatiated about to you in, I fear, far too copious and boring detail. That meeting in the rarefied reaches of the Himalayas with the Master — hidden like a pearl of great worth in his alpine hermitage — and my subsequent revelatory year's tutelage under him has finally resulted in my settling down to pursue a definitive course of action, one calculated to make the best use of my talents. My adopted country, I feel confident in saying, is now Amerika, practically the last country unvisited by me in an official engineering capacity, yet one of which I have often dreamed — right down to spurious details such as a sword-wielding Statue of Liberty! It is here, at the dynamic new center of the century, that I have finally planted sustainable roots.

As for your new role as wife and mother, you must accept my sincerest congratulations. You know that I esteem parenthood most highly — despite having many reasons well known to you for the likely development of exactly the opposite opinion. Once I actually dared dream of such a role for myself. But such a happy circumstance was not to be. For although there have been many women in my life, none seemed equal to my idiosyncratic needs. (Any regrets I may have once had regarding my eternal bachelorhood are long extinguished, of course.) Curiously enough, my employer, Herr Macfadden, saw fit to accost me on this very topic today. Perhaps I shall take his blunt advice to heart and resume courting the fair sex, if only for temporary amusement. Although the rigors of my curious manner of existence have grown, if anything, even more demanding than before . . . .

Fleshing out his letter with another page or two of trivial anecdotes and polite domestic and familial inquiries, Kafka paused at the closing endearment. After some thought, he finally inscribed it: "Give my regards to Mother — and Mother alone." Weighing the sealed letter with a small balance, he affixed the precisely requisite postage to it, then took the elevator down to the lobby of his building, where he left the missive with the concierge.

But then, instead of returning to his apartment or exiting onto the busy Manhattan street, Kafka moved to an innocuous door in a forlorn corner of the lobby. Looking about to ascertain whether anyone was observing him, he quickly insinuated himself through the portal.

A wanly lit flight of stairs led downward. Soon Kafka was in the basement. Crossing that nighted realm, Kafka reached another set of stairs. Within seconds, he was in a subcellar.

This underground kingdom seemed even darker than the level above, save for a distant flickering glow. Kafka moved toward this partially shielded lightsource.

Heat mounted. On the far side of a gap-slatted wooden partition, Kafka came face to face with an enormous, Moloch-like furnace. Its door was open, and from an enormous pile of coal a half-naked man shoveled scoop after scoop of black lumps.

For some time Kafka watched the brawny sweating man work. He knew neither the man's name nor his history. Kafka assumed he lived here, within reach of his fiery charge, for no matter when Kafka visited he found the stoker busy tending his demanding master.

The congruence with his own situation did not go unregarded by Kafka.

On the floor stood a pail of cinder-flecked water with a dipper in it. Kafka took up the dipper and raised it to the stoker's lips. Without stopping his shoveling, the laborer greedily drank the warm sooty liquid. After several repetitions of this beneficence, the man signalled by a grunt his satisfaction.

Feeling free now to tend to his own business, Kafka stepped around the bulk of the furnace. Behind this asbestos-clad monster was another door, seemingly placed without sense. Through this door Kafka stepped.

And into the Jackdaw's sanctum.

Strange machines and devices bulked in the shadows not entirely dispelled by several low-wattage bulbs. An exit leading who-knows-where could be vaguely discerned. Near the entrance door on a peg hung the famous feathered cape; on a table sat mask, hat and canary-colored gloves. In a glass case was a gun belt, and sundry other portable gadgetry.

With lingering, almost fetishistic pleasure, Kafka donned his disguise. A transformative surge passed through him, rendering him somehow larger than life.

Emitting a mild sotto voice version of his shrill cry, the Jackdaw stepped to a ticker-tape device. Picking up the trailing paper, he began to scan its contents.

"Hmmm . . . . The Mousehole Gang suspected in daring daylight bank robbery, but police on the case . . . . Dogface Barton in prison break, but likely hideout believed known . . . . The dirigible *Shenandoah* to make maiden flight . . . . Ku Klux Klan to stage Washington rally . . . . Yes, yes, but nothing here for me — Wait, what's this? 'The Federal Bureau of Investigation under its new director Mr. Hoover is pursuing reports of an extortion attempt upon oil and steel magnate John D. Rockefeller by a hitherto unknown Zionist agent provocateur using the pseudonym of "The Black Beetle . . . ."' Ah, this has the Jackdaw's name writ large upon it!"

THE DOOR TO KAFKA'S OFFICE OPENED AND MILLIE JENSEN ENTERED, carrying a sheaf of papers. She stood quietly for a moment, regarding the affecting sight before her, which evoked a tender sigh from her sympathetic nature.

Kafka's face rested insensibly on a surface definitely not intended for such a purpose: the uncomfortable keys and platen of his Corona typing machine. Gentle snores issued from the sleeping columnist.

Millie tried awakening him by tapping her foot. When this method produced no effect, she began to cough, at first femininely, then with increasing violence, until her ultimate efforts resembled the paroxysms of a tuberculosis victim.

Her ploy worked at last, for Kafka jolted awake with a start, almost like a caged dangerous beast, taking in his situation with a single wild-eyed glance before his usual mask of calm fell into place.

"Ah, Miss Jensen, please excuse my inattention. I was inspecting the mechanism. Its performance was unsatisfactory — "

"Oh, you don't need to make excuses with me, Frank," said Millie, not unkindly. "I know you're exerting yourself night and day to accomplish — certain things."

"Yes, quite eorrect. My, um, novel is presenting me with certain intractable difficulties. Important lines of the plot refuse to resolve themselves — "

"Yeah, gotcha, kiddo." Millie regarded Kafka slyly and with a humorous glint in her green eyes. "Say, did you ever think that by relaxing a little, you might find an answer to your problems unconsciously?"

Kafka smiled. "Why, Millie, you sound positively like a disciple of Herr Freud."

"Oh, a girl likes to keep abreast of the latest fads. But I'm serious. You like the movies, don't you?"

"I believe that the einema represents a valid new sensory experience akin to the exteriorization of one's dreams."

"And their popcorn generally ain't so bad either. Well, it's a Friday, and the new Chaplin is playing downtown. *The Gold Rush.* Wanna catch it with me tonight?"

Kafka deliberated momentarily before brightening and giving a surprisingly hearty and colloquial assent. "Millie, I'm your man!"

Turning to leave — or so that she could regard Kafka coquettishly over one shoulder, Millie replied, "That remains to be seen!"

STREAMING OUT FROM THE DOORS OF THE NATURE THEATER OF OKLAhoma — a popular begemmed movie palace owned by the most famous and suecessful son of that prairie state, the comedian Will Rogers — the happy moviegoers soon dispersed into the evening bustle of Manhattan. Left behind were a single man and woman; the pair seemed hesitant or unsure of their next destination, like moths deprived of their phototropism.

After a protracted silence, Millie chirpily asked Kafka, "So, Frank, whadda'd you think? What a riot, huh?"

Millie's date seemed lost in thought, his dark features enrapt in a fugue of consternation. "That scene where Chaplin is starving and forced to eat his own shoe made me feel so strange … . It corresponded exactly to an enervatmg emotion I myself have had on numerous occasions."

"Really? Gosh, I feel plenty bad for you, Frank. Look at you — you're wound up so tight you're ready to burst to pieces! What you need is a feminine presence in your life, someone to take care of you and nurture you. Don't you think that would be nice?"

"If you speak of marriage, Miss Jensen, I fear that such a normal mortal luxury is forever denied me. A formal union with a woman would result not only in the dissolution of the nothingness that I am, but doom also my poor wife."

"Holy cats, Frank, you've been reading the fake sob stories in our rag too much! Or maybe you've even been dipping into *Weird Tales* ! Life just isn't as complex or melodramatic as you or those three-hankie writers make it out to be! " Millie linked her arm through Kafka's and leaned her head on his shoulder. "A man and a woman together — what could be simpler?"

Kafka did not disengage, but instead, seeming to take some small encouragement from the simple human contact, managed to pull himself together with a visible effort.

"I'm sorry to be such a wet blanket, Millie, when all yon sought was a gay night out. Truthfully, I have not felt so melancholy for nearly twenty years. This black humor was something I thought I had left behind in the dank and dismal streets of Prague. The cosmopohtan, globe-trotting engineer known as Frank Kafka was a mature, vibrant, self-assured fellow. But it appears now that he was only a paper cutout that quickly withers in the flames of frustration."

Since Kafka was at least communicating again, Millie's natural exuberance reasserted itself. "Oh, bosh and piffle, Frank! Everyone gets a dose of the blues now and then. It'll pass, you'll see! All we have to do is spend an hour or two doing something pleasant. What do you really, really like to do? How about grabbing a coffee and some pastry? The Hotel Occidental has a great coffee shop. I bet their jelly donuts will make you think of Vienna!"

"That sounds fine, Milhe. But if you'd really like to know what I enjoy — "

"Yes, yes, Frank — tell me!"

"I like to contemplate the Brooklyn Bridge. Mister Roebling's masterpiece reminds me of some of the humbler constructions I myself was once responsible for. Sometimes those noble buttresses alone seem endurable and without shame to me, amidst all the city's charade. But I don't suppose — "

"Frank, I'd love bridge-watching with you! Let's go!"

With Millie forcefully tugging on her co-worker's arm, the mismatched couple began to move up Broadway. Soon, they were within sight of City Hall and not far from the majestic span across the East River.

As they crossed the small park in front of City Hall, the shrill scream of a hysterical woman brought them to an abrupt halt. This initial call of alarm was quickly followed by a swelling chorus of indignation, fear, eonfusion and outrage.

Kafka raced toward the source of the noise, Millie trailing behind.

A growing, growling, agitated crowd lifted its gaze skyward. Atop the very roof of City Hall stood an ominous figure. Diminutive yet powerful, with the warped back and hypertrophied cranium of a Quasimodo, he was clad in a form-fitting black union-suit that merged into face-concealing, antennae-topped headgear. From his back sprouted small, wire-stiffened cellophane wings; from his torso, parallel rows of artificial abdominal feelers. The creature could be none other than —

The bomb went noise and the shrapnel,

"The Black Beetle!" shouted an onlooker.

"Where's the eops?" yelled someone else.

"Where's the Jackdaw?" yelled another.

Kafka stood quivering beside Millie like a dog on a leash faced with an impudent raccoon or squirrel.

The Black Beetle began to harangue his audience in a slightly accented English, showering them with incomprehensible slogans and demands.

"Down with all Anti-Semites! Up with Zionism! Palestine for the Jews! The Mufti of Jerusalem must die! America must support the Zionist cause! If she does not do so willingly, with guns and money, we shall compel her to! Take this as a sign of our seriousness!"

There was nothing eqnivocal or esoteric about the round bomb which the Black Beetle now produced from somewhere on his person. The sight of its sizzling fuse raised a loud inchoate cry from the erowd, and people began to scatter in all directions.

"Long live the Stern Gang!" shouted the Black Beetle as he hurled his explosive device.

Kafka knocked Millie to the ground and covered her body with his lanky form.

The bomb went off, filling their world with noise and the reek of gunpowder, hurtling shrapnel, flying cement chips and clumps of sod.

Immediately after the detonation, Kafka leaped to his feet and surveyed the situation. By a miracle of Providence, it appeared that no

person had been caught in the blast, the destruction confined to turf, sidewalk and park benches.

As for the Black Beetle — in the confusion, he had made good his escape.

Kafka slumped in despair, muttering, "Useless, useless, all ambition. And yet what joy, imagining again the pleasure of a knife twisted in my heart . . . ."

Millie had regained her feet and was brushing her clothes clean. "Frank — are you okay?"

Kafka straightened. "Millie, our night together is over. I trust you can find your own way home? I have — I must be going "

"Why, sure, Frank. See you in the office."

Kafka hurriedly departed. Millie hung back until he turned a corner. Then she slipped after him, always keeping a shield of pedestrians between them.

She followed her quarry as far as Times Square. There, in a squalid doorway apart from the more wholesome foot-traffic, as Millie watched from concealment behind a shuttered kiosk, Kafka approached two gaudy women of obvious ill repute, leaving, after a slight dickering, with both of the overpainted floozies, plainly headed toward the entrance of a nearby fleabag hotel.

"Oh, Frank! Why?" Millie exclaimed, and began to weep.

DEAREST OTTLA,

I write to you today hoping to clarify my own thoughts on one particular matter, that being our shared ancestry and heritage. A disturbing incident of late has unleashed a savage pack of old feelings and recriminations I thought long tamed. I have always admired at a suitable distance your passionate embrace of an ultra-modern synthesis of our old family religion — perhaps strictly for its certitude — although I could never myself feel comfortable in its suffocating clutches. Perhaps your perspective will aid me in seeing my own status afresh.

We are Jews, of course. Jews by birth, an inescapable heritage of the blood. You have affirmed this ancient taint wholeheartedly, passionately enlisting in such causes as the rescue of the *Ostjuden* and the formation of a Jewish homeland in the Palestine protectorate. I, on the other hand, have violently abandoned any such affiliations and attitudes, a decision enforced not solely by my rational intellect and the study of comparative cultures enabled by my extensive travels, but equally by my gut.

How you ever maintained any religious feeling, raised in our household as you were, I cannot imagine. Dragged by *him* , we went to synagogue a bare four times a year, and it was a farce, a joke. No, not even a joke. I've never been so bored in my life, I believe, except later on at dance lessons. I did enjoy the small distractions, such as the opening of the Ark, which always reminded me of a shooting gallery where, when you hit a bull's-eye, a door flips open the same way, except that at the gallery something interesting popped out, while here it was always the same old dolls without heads.

Later, I saw things in a slightly less harsh light, and realized what could lead you to believe. You had actually managed to salvage some scraps of Judaism from that small, ghetto-like congregation. For me, it was not to be, and I firmly affixed a Solomonic seal to the whole stinking corpse of my incipient, puerile Judaism and buried it deep.

But now, this old specter has arisen again, lashed into an unnatural afterlife by the chance meeting with a Zionist demagogue.

What I humbly request from you, dearest sister, are two things First, a well-marshalled explanation and defense of your own faith. Second, and perhaps more vitally, some information regarding the chief figures of the European Zionist scene, specifically any particulars concerning a certain crook-backed firebrand . . . .

THE DOOR TO KAFKA'S OFFICE WAS THRUST OPEN SO VIOLENTLY THAT IT swung through a full half-circle of arc to bang against the wall in which it was hung, making the inset glass pane quiver like a shaken quilt.

Kafka clapped his hands to his ears and winced. "Millie, was that strictly necessary?"

Millie snorted, then stomped across the room. "That's 'Miss Jensen' to you, *Mister* Kafka!" She flung an armful of papers down on Kafka's desk and pivoted to leave.

Kafka stood and moved to her side. "Millie — or if you insist, Miss Jensen. I realize that our date did not end in a particularly satisfying fashion, and that perhaps your nerves are still abuzz from our shared brush with death. And yet, I fancied that until that unforeseen, inaesthetic climax we were enjoying ourselves much like any other couple."

Millie's jade eyes flared with anger. "Oh, sure, right till we nearly got blown up things were hunky-dory. But what came *after* was the real shocker!"

"After? I don't understand — No, surely you couldn't have — "

"But I did, Mister Barn Veeve-ant, Filly-der-joy Kafka! And let me just tell you this, buster! Any guy who'd pass up some heavy petting with me in favor of two clapped-out, gussied-up old trollops is not someone who's ever going to learn if I wear my stockings rolled!"

off, filling their world with reek of gunpowder, hurtling flying cement chips . . .

And with that obscure assertion, Millie departed as noisily as she had come.

Kafka sat down at his desk and cradled his head in his hands. There came a polite knock, followed by the entrance of officeboy Carl.

Kafka looked up. "The Boss?"

Carl simply nodded, his expression and demeanor conveying the utmost solemn sympathy.

Once more Kafka stood before the forbidding door to Bernarr Macfadden's office. Dispiritedly he knocked, weanly entered when bidden.

Macfadden was employing an apparatus of steel springs and bakelite grips in exercises intended to strengthen his upper body. Seated behind his massive desk, he stretched and released the resistant springs like a demented candymaker fighting recalcitrant taffy. Sweat dripped from his aggressive mustache as, grunting, he nodded Kafka to a seat.

Watching in horrified fascination, Kafka sought within him for some last untapped resource of strength. A phrase of the Master's came back to him unbidden: "The axe that cleaves the frozen sea within us . . . ." Why could he no longer lay his grip upon that once-familiar haft?

Finally Kafka's superior finished his exertions. Dropping the device, he wiped his brow and then poured himself some brown sludge from his flask. That Kafka was not offered any of the drink, the advice-columnist considered a bad omen.

Macfadden began to lecture, on a topic of seemingly small relevance.

"I'm not one of your hypocritical, church-going, priest-worshipping, narrow-minded Babbits, Frank. Far from it! Open-minded toleration and clear-sighted experimentation has always been my gameplan. I'll endorse any mode of living that honors the body and the mind and the soul. But I draw the line at one thing. Do you know what that is?"

"No, sir. What?"

"Blasphemy!" thundered Macfadden. "Blasphemy of the sort contained in these galleys of yours, which I took the precaution of securing a look at before they reached print! And thank the Lord I did! I can't imagine the magnitude of the hue and cry that would have followed the publication of this corker!"

"Sir, to what are you referring ... ?"

"This answer of yours to 'Doubting in Denver.' 'If we were possessed by only a single devil, one who had a calm, untroubled view of our whole nature, and freedom to dispose of us at any moment, then that devil would also have enough power to hold us for the length of a human life high above the spirit of God in us, and even swing us to and fro so that we should never get to see a glimmer of it and therefore should not be troubled from that quarter.'"

Weakly, Kafka replied, "You misconstrue my meaning — "

Macfadden crumpled the galleys savagely. "Misconstrue, hell! It's the most blatant decadent Satanism I've ever seen! That poor girl! I hate to imagine how her life could have been ruined by these aberrant Nietzschean gutter-sweepings of yours! No, Frank, you've had your chance. You had a good job, but you threw it away. I want you to clean out your desk right now, collect your last pay and be off."

Kafka said nothing in his own defense. He knew that all he could say would appear quite different to Macfadden, and that whether a good or bad construction was to be put on his actions had all along depended solely on Macfadden's judgmental spirit. And besides, the summed weight of all the misunderstandings he was the center of now sat upon his shoulders like a sack of coal on a stevedore's back, robbing him of speech. A flickering, cool little flame had taken up residence in the left side of his head, and a tension over his left eye had settled down and made itself at home. Coming to his feet, Kafka turned to go.

Now that he had vented his spleen, Macfadden softened somewhat toward his ex-employee, to the point of offering advice. "Maybe you should try something that doesn't involve contact with the public so much, Frank. Go back to the railroads. Or you could always try the insurance industry. Lots of call for analysts and writers there."

Kafka left without a word.

On his way from the building, he was forced to thread an unwelcome, albeit generally friendly gantlet of his ex-coworkers. Most of them uttered sympathetic farewells and useful advice, all of which pelted Kafka like hailstones.

The ultimate face in the series belonged to Millie. Seemingly genuine tears of sorrow had snailed her cheeks.

"Oh, Frank, I had no idea — "

Kafka came alert, straightening his back. "Millie, I regret anything I have done to cause you distress. For a time, I acted like a lost sheep in the night and in the mountains. Or rather, like a sheep which is running after this sheep. But now my course is clear."

"What's that, Frank?" sniffled Millie.

"To let my own devil fully possess me."

And with that, Kafka walked with what he hoped was a passably erect carriage through the door.

A WRINKLED, DISINTEGRATING NEWSPAPER, HALF SOAKING IN THE WET gutter, half draped over the granite curb, bore large headlines just legible under the wan buttercup-colored glow of a streetlamp:

JACKDAW TERRORIZES UNDERWORLD!

POLICE HARD PUT TO JAIL ALL MALEFACTORS DELIVERED TO THEIR DOOR!

COURTS CLOGGED!

"WHAT IS HE AFTER?" ASKS PUBLIC

COMMISSIONER O'HALLORAN SPECULATES:

"IT SEEMS HE HAS A GRUDGE AGAINST THE BLACK BEETLE"

A booted foot ground down upon the discarded tabloid, pulping its substance. The foot moved on, followed by its mate, carrying their owner with determined stealth across the sidewalk and up to the very wall of a derelict building. There the boots halted.

The Jackdaw studied the structure before him. His keen eyes caught sight of a line of ornamental carvings above the second-story windows. Deftly the masked avenger uncoiled a grapple and cord from around his waist. In mere seconds he was standing on a ledge some dozen feet above the ground. From there he progressed rapidly up the side of the seemingly abandoned building until he crouched before the lighted panes of a sixth-floor window.

Inside, men clustered around a table on which bomb-making materials were scattered. Consulting a plan and arguing among themselves, they were oblivious to their watcher.

Chuckling softly to himself, the Jackdaw stood. Tugging the rope secured above him to test its stability, he next leaned backward into sheer space at an angle to the wall, supported by his yellow-gloved grip on the rope. With a kick, he propelled himself away from the wall. At the end of his short arc into darkness, he was aimed feet-first for the glass and moving at some speed.

As he hit, glass and wood exploding inward, the Jackdaw emitted his nerve-shattering cry.

It was enough. The bombmakers fell cowering to the floor, failing even to reach for their weapons.

"We give up! Don't kill us! Please!"

The Jackdaw picked up one of the spineless hirelings of the Black Beetle with maniacal force. "Where is he! The Black Beetle! Talk!"

"Lower East Side! In the basement of Schnitzler's Market on Delancey Street! That's his headquarters! Honest!"

"Very well! Now, you gentlemen look as if you could use a little nap before your ride in the Black Maria — "

THE PICK IN THE LOCK OF THE REAR DOOR TO SCHNITZLER'S MARKET tickled the tumblers as delicately as a virgin toying with the strap of her camisole in some Weimar brothel. Within seconds, the Jackdaw had gained entrance. Tiptoeing across the shadowy storage room thus revealed the Jackdaw spied what was patently the basement door.

As he twisted its handle, there came a noise from above of rattling chains.

With a tremendous crash a large cage fell, trapping the Jackdaw!

Gas hissed out from hidden nozzles.

Consciousness departed from the Jackdaw like an offended customer offered inferior goods huffily exiting a carriage trade establishment.

When he awoke, the Jackdaw found himself lying belly down on some kind of padded platform, secured at wrists, waist and ankles, and stripped of his mask and cape. His chin was cupped in a kind of trough, and a leather strap went around his brow, forcing him to bend his neck at a strained angle. The sole sight before his eyes was a brick wall with flaking grey paint and blooming excrescences of nitre.

Into the Jackdaw's view now walked a man.

With a tremendous crash fell, trapping the Jackdaw! out from hidden

The Black Beetle, bent of back, bulging of skull.

"So, we meet again after so long, Franz Kafka!"

Even in extremis, his careful deliberation of speech had not deserted Kafka. Far from blurting out a plea for mercy or a useless threat, Kafka now uttered a simple, "Again?"

An ooze of false sincerity and hollow bonhomie dripped from the Black Beetle's voice. "Ah, but of course! I am still masked. How discourteous! Allow me … ." The Black Beetle doffed his headgear, so that the attached piece of his suit with its antennae hung down his back like an improperly molted skin. Kafka saw the gnomish face of a stranger his own age, in no way familiar.

"I see you are still puzzled by my identity," continued the Black Beetle. "Naturally, there is no reason for you to remember such a nonentity as Max Brod!"

"Max Brod? Weren't you the Altstadter Gymnasium with me as a youth? But that was over two decades ago, and we hardly ever spoke a single word to each other even then! Had we been college chums, grown close, perhaps I would have remembered. But such a trivial connection — "

"Of course we never spoke! Who would bother to seek out conversation with a crippled, graceless overachiever such as I was then? Not the haughty, handsome Franz Kafka, by any means! Oh, no, he never had time to see the pitiful, adoring youngster who idolized him, who hung on the fringes of his precious little circle — Pollack, Pribam, Baum, that whole bunch! — desperately hoping for some little crumb of attention! And then, when you left me behind in Prague, the agonies of severed affection I suffered! The sleepless nights in a

a large cage Gas hissed nozzles.

sweat-soaked bed, writhing under the lash of your image! The long hikes and swims intended to burn away your memory, but which only succeeded in somewhat alleviating my childhood bodily afflictions. Even your absence became a kind of presence, for the glorious figure of Engineer Kafka and his faraway glorious deeds were forever thrust before my eyes by all and sundry in the small world of Jewish Prague society."

The strain on Kafka's neck was beginning to nauseate him. "And — and have you tracked me down then only to sate your unnatural obsessions and take revenge?"

Brod laughed sourly. "Even now you cast all events with yourself at the center! Far from it, Mister Vaunted Jackdaw! This victory is merely a sweet lagniappe. You see, the only way I was able to forget about you and recover my wits and energies was to plunge myself into a cause larger than myself. Zionism was the flame that reignited me!

"At first, I allied myself with one of your old buddies, Weltsch, and his journal *Selbstwehr* . But he proved too meek and mild for my tastes, and I soon found more radical companions. Willingly, to spite all those who see the Jew as the cockroach of civilization, I adopted this disguise. Now I and my comrades wage a worldwide campaign of terror and coercion with the aim of establishing a Jewish state in Palestine. You in your foolish crimefighting role stood in the way of my goals here in America, so I simply chose to stomp on you. The wonderful irony of our early connection was merely a token that Yahweh continues to smile on me."

"And now what will you do with me?"

From somewhere on his person, Brod produced a crisp crimson apple. After polishing it on his sleeve, he began to crunch it, chewing avidly, as if to mock his captive. "I shall enlist you in a scientific experiment. You are secured, you see, to the bed of a unique apparatus intended to convince the enemies of Zionism of their folly. Above you is an adjustable clockwork mechanism which can be set to reproduce certain movements in what we call 'the Harrow,' to which it is connected by various subtle motors.

"The Harrow features two kinds of needles arranged in multiple patterns. Each long needle has a short one beside it. The long needle does a kind of inkless tattoo writing directly into your flesh, and the shorter needle sprays a jet of water to wash away the blood and keep the inscription clear. Blood and water are then conducted here through small runnels into this main runnel and down a waste pipe."

"I see. And what text have you chosen to inscribe on my flesh?"

"A portion of the Talmud dealing with traitors to the Jewish race!"

Discarding the core of his apple, Brod moved out of Kafka's view. In the next second, Kafka felt his garments being slit open to expose his back.

"I am sorry you will not survive your re-education, my dear Franz. But the process, to be effective, must be repeated hundreds of times over many hours!"

Kafka waited tensely for the start of the physical torture. But what came next was the last thing he expected.

"By the way," said Brod with fiendish glee, "your beloved *father* sends his usual sentiments!"

Kafka swooned straight away.

When he regained consciousness, the re-education machine was already in action.

What felt like a bed of nails now touched Kafka's back, and he was instantly reminded of enduring a similar sensation under the Master's tutelage. Yet even those lessons in self-mastery were bound to disintegrate under repetitive assaults of the Harrow, especially when his psyche was weakened by the Black Beetle's psychological thrust.

Kafka strained against his bonds, to no avail.

"Perhaps you'd care to vent that ridiculous cry of yours once more? No, I thought not. Very well, prepare yourself — "

Suddenly a loud crash sounded from above them, followed by the clamor of urgent gruff voices.

"Damnation! Well, I see I must leave my fun. But not before witnessing the first prick!"

Dozens of dancing needles pierced Kafka as if he were Saint Sebastian, and he swore his skin could interpret the agonizing shapes of the Hebrew letters. It took all his Oriental training not to scream.

Footsteps galloped down a flight of wooden stairs. The needles continued their cruel and arcane tarantella. Shots rang out. Kafka lost his senses.

He swam up out of blackness apparently only moments later, and felt his bleeding form to be freed from the Harrow and cradled in a soft embrace. The tearful face of Millie Jensen regarded him from above.

"Oh, Frank! Tell me you're going to make it!"

Kafka groaned. "The palimpsest of my hide still has room for a few more passages … ."

Millie bent to kiss him. "Thank God! I was sure we'd be too late! I've been haunting the police since the day you were fired, trying to convince them I knew who the Jackdaw was, trying to stop you for your own good! When those bombmakers finally came around and the police beat some information out of them, I tagged along! Everything's fine now, Frank!"

A certain lifelong tension inherent in his very sinews and musculature seemed to have been drained from Kafka along with his blood. Momentarily, he thought to ask whether the Black Beetle had escaped, then realized he didn't care. Max Brod's fanaticism would lead to his own undoing sooner or later, much as Kafka's had nearly led to his.

"Millie?"

"Yes, Frank?"

"Have you ever considered what marriage to me might entail?"

Millie kissed him again. "Well, you're nothing to crow about — "

Kafka winced. "Millie, please, my writer's sensibilities have not been extinguished — "

"But you'd be a feather in any girl's cap!" □

By Connie Hirsch

For roleplaying and *The X-Files* fans, the cards (and the truth) are out there.



ABOVE: *In the third seoson episode "2Shy,"* The X-FiIes *crew must confront o creepy predator who sucks the fot from overweight women.* BELOW: *The informotion-dense yet artfully designed cords ore a perfect motch for the show's poranoid oir.*

I ONCE MISSED MY CHANCE TO MAKE AN ACCURATE "I have seen the future" prediction — and by *this* much. Several years ago, I stood in the hallway at an SF convention, and watched two people trying out this brand-new game called *Magic.* My inquiry as to what it was produced the impression that it was a combination of role-playing game, a la *Dungeons & Dragons*, and baseball trading cards. It was then that I made my mistake. "The people who created this," I clearly recall saying, "are going to make a million dollars!"

Well, I was off by quite a bit, as it turned out, to the tune of many *more* millions. In fact, I was hardly the only person surprised, including some of the folks back at Wizards of the Coast. A lot of game-developers today would *love* to be surprised by such success again, I think.

Which desire brings us the newest contender in the genre, *The X-Files Collectoble Card Gome*, newly out from the venerable United States Playing Card Company, using images and concepts from the hit Twentieth Century Fox TV show. Can a tie-in product/game hope to offer a worthwhile addition to the gaming card market? If the overall set of 354 different cards is as clever as are the sample Starter Deck and Basic Game rules sent to me for play-testing, the answer may well be yes.



The basic concepts of this game will not be too arcane to anyone who has ever played *Magic* — or *Clue*, for that matter! Players take turns being an investigator or conspirator, sending their Agents to investigate Sites with the help of Equipment, Bluff, Witness, and Event cards, while the opposing player can use Bluff, Event, and Adversary cards against them. Any investigation where the Site is successfully resolved — i.e. the Investigating Player prevails against all the opposing player throws against him — allows the winner ask one Characteristic question about the opposing player's concealed X-File card.

It's not quite "Cigarette-Smoking Man in the Pentagon with a Loaded Alien" — there are four Characteristics (Affiliation, Motive, Method & Result) with five possible types (for instance: Affiliation has Alien, Government, Evolutionary, Primordial & Occult) — but it allows each player to gradually zero in on a combination that will identify a unique X-File Card.

The possible combinations of the collectable cards is of prime importance to game strategy, depending upon what part of the field of play they will be located, and which phase of the player turn is being played. Each turn phases through Briefing (players bring card hands up to 10), Healing (remove damage tokens), Requisition (hand out new equipment or move between Agents), Deployment (move eligible Agents between Bureau, Field, and Hospital), Case Assignment (choose Site to investigate) and Investigation (both players play cards to determine if Characteristic question will be asked). Finally, there is an optional Debriefing phase, where up to three cards can be discarded. Then, a turn starts up for the player who opposed, who now becomes the investigator, and so on.

Each Agent Card has a long list of idiosyncratic abilities, necessitating strategic deployment to depending on skills required. For instance, you may want to pick a Site like Gibsonton, FL (site of TV show episode "Humbug") that questions Method if you've already solved Affiliation and Result — as long as you've got your Agent Dana Scully card with Medical Skill 4, necessary to resolve the investigation. Equipment cards, which can add to Skills, can usually be requisitioned in the Bureau section, but only used out in the Field section.

Agents go "out" to the Field Section to investigate Sites (also cards, signifying what additive strength of abilities is needed to win the right to question a certain Characteristic), where they can be damaged (if not successfully countered) by the opposing player's Adversary

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Cards — in which case, they get sent to the Hospital section for two rounds' time-out.

Now, if at this point you're scratching your head because what I've described may seem highly reminiscent of a season of *The X-Files*, well, that's part of the neatness of this game!

High-level conspiracies, alien invasions and high improbability scientific weirdness are not exactly going to be unfamiliar to gamers, so it will not be necessary to be a fan (X-Phile!) of the TV show in order to enjoy the game. On the other hand, if you are friends of Mulder, Scully, Mr. X, Krycek, Cigarette-Smoking Man and the rest of that — er — *loveable* crew, it will add another enjoyable level to the game as you first get to see your noble Agents struggle to pierce through the dark intricate conspiracies — and then on the next turn, get to play the conspirators trying to foil those same misguided so-called heroes.

The "chrome" on the cards — their physical design — is really quite terrific: information-dense, yet also esthetically pleasing in design and image. Each card features a still photograph from a specific episode, referencing its subject in some way: "Mr. X" for an Event; Arecibo, Puerto Rico (the setting for "Little Green Men") for a Site; The Calusari (from the episode of the same name) for a Witness; a High Resolution Camera (from "Clyde Bruckman's Last Repose") for an Equipment card.

The density of information is quite impressive. In addition to a picture, each card includes its name, its type in the upper left-hand corner, Keywords and Activators (to determine if the card can be used in certain play areas, Sites, and situations) running up the left side, Game Effect explanation, a Story Line reference (a brief quote referencing the specific episode, such as the Frohike Event Card's "If that's the lovely Agent Scully, let her know I've been working out. I'm BUFF!", and lastly a unique card identifier as to set, year, and number inconspicuously tucked away within the design.

That's a lot for a card barely 2.5 by 3.5 inches, but the designers have managed to squeeze it all together harmoniously, and rather cleverly, too. Each card type has a theme to its design: for instance, the Witness Card features the picture as though projected onto a screen, part of the "slide", and an arc of the slide projector carrel as seen from above. The Site Card is even more elaborate — the card title is "paper-clipped" to the upper left hand, the picture is framed to look like a Polaroid, the Game Effects are on a "file card", the episode quote is "handwritten" on a sticky note, plus the card background is an indistinct map featuring a magnifying loupe and a compass. Many little details in the card's design reward close examination — the pencil on each X-File Card reads "NIXON" and "TRUTH,", there's a cigarette smoking away in an ashtray on each Adversary Card, and each Equipment Card features several curls of *red* tape in the upper right corner

All this rich detail supplies a lot of quip hooks — opportunities to crack wise — to the X-Phile or even the casual gamer. You may not know who Assistant Director Skinner is on the show, but you will surely remark on his bureaucracy skill when the red tape begins to strangle. You may play the "Slithers In The Night" Adversary card, and joke about snakes or let "Darkness Falls" descend on your opponent. All in a day's work at the FBI, after all!

Another elegant effort is the palm-size 36 page Basic Game booklet, just a smidge bigger than the cards themselves, and equally attractive, illustrated throughout with clever artwork and informative diagrams. The rules documentation is plainly written and rarely ambiguous, allowing play-testers to get up to speed within a handful of rounds.

With experienced players the game should be fast and fun, allowing an fascinating blend of strategy and luck of the draw. Drawbacks to the game are few and far between, such as the small type on some of the cards making trouble for those who wear bifocals — surely not a large part of the card game market at present.

Most frustrating for the play-testers was the knowledge that the Advanced Rules were not included for this sample pack, though tantalizing hints are available from the cards themselves, such as the Game Effects that are not utilized on the Adversary Cards. For the Abduction card from the "Conduit" episode: "Pick one Agent in the Team. That Agent is placed 10 cards down, face up, in the owning player's Bureau deck. Any equipment the Agent had is discarded. When the Agent's card reaches the top of the deck, the Agent is immediately moved to the Hospital (undamaged). This card does not initiate combat." In the Basic Game, combat is obviously quite simplified, not to mention some business with Conspiracy and Resource Points on the cards, which I haven't gotten around to mentioning. It sounds like there's going to be even more strategy opportunities in the Advanced Game — wish I could have given it a try!

The last drawback to this game is what I term the threshold factor. To make a collectable card game successful, you're going to have to have enough card players out there to trade cards, not entirely unlike the threshold for atomic chain reactions — once you've got enough people playing and trading and buying and playing and so on, the fun of the game will be assured. Even with a sample Starter Deck (60 random cards) and a booster pack (15 random cards), you'll have enough to get started — but will you have anyone to get started with?

At any rate, having played with *The X-Files Collectable Card Game*, I can say for a fact that it's pleasant, even elegant, and can provide X-Philes and card-traders with a lot of fun. I may not have seen the future this time either, but I do know a good thing when I see it. The cards are out there, may the conspiracies begin! □

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MOVIES

Continued from page 33

With an overall budget that topped $50 million, *First Contact* also had the largest production design budget of any Trek film since *Star Trek: The Motion Picture*. "We spent over five million dollars on the sets alone," notes Zimmerman. "But the picture will look like an $80 to $100 million dollar picture."

As with *Generations*, special effects for *First Contact* were handled by Industrial Light and Magic, while veteran Trek make-up artist Michael Westmore designed the enhanced look for the Borg.

Pre-production on *First Contact* started the first week in January, 1996, with principal photography beginning in April. The twelve-week shoot included three weeks of filming on location at Arizona's Titan Missile Museum, the Angeles National Forest near Los Angeles, and an abandoned restaurant in downtown L.A.'s Union Station. Transformations were the order of the day: Zimmerman's team built a 21st former military encampment century town in the middle of the forest, while the restaurant served as a 1940s locale for a holodeck sequence. The remainder of the shoot was filmed on the soundstages of Paramount Pictures.

The last time we saw the Enterprise, the vessel was a scattered mass of charred ruins, the victim of a spectacular crash landing in *Generations*. Replacing that ship is the powerful, Sovereign class U.S.S. Enterprise 1701-E. "It's a beautiful ship, more spacious," says Zimmerman, appraising his latest creation. The new, sleek shape of the Enterprise, says Zimmerman, "is perhaps a little more aerodynamic in profile. It has some elements of the Voyager ship, but it also harkens all the way back to the Enterprise of *Star Trek: The Motion Picture*. A lot of thought went into the ship to make it a logically continuous design from the earlier starships."

Zimmerman drew on the experiences of *Next Generation*, *Deep Space Nine*, and *Voyager* when designing the new ship's bridge, taking the best elements of each of those starships and putting them together to create the Enterprise-E's bridge. "It's a little less comfortable and more business-like than the Enterprise-D, intentionally so since it was built with the threat of the Borg in mind," says Zimmerman. "The captain is at a central command station, and his lieutenants are surrounding him, pretty much facing him, so they're instantly at the captain's beck and call." Main engineering, continues Zimmerman, "is the most dramatic engine room that we've ever created, with the largest warp engine yet seen on a starship. The ship also has miles and miles of corridors in this picture, new Jefferies Tube designs, and a cargo bay that opens to space."

The fundamental difference between designing for *Star Trek*, the television series, and *Star Trek*, the feature films is scope. "The features screen is much less forgiving than a television screen. Out of necessity, the details of the motion picture have to be more carefully attended to. Your fit and finish, and your attention to all the subtleties of design, have to be much more carefully drawn for a feature than they have to be for a TV show."

Similarly, there's a different dynamic between writing for television and writing for film. Braga is in the perfect position to understand those differences; after all, Braga has been with *Star Trek: The Next Generation* since 1990. "The main difference, of course, is scope. You have a much bigger budget, you can do sequences differently, and you can have a lot more sets and characters. You want it to be more special, and you want it to be bigger, to take bigger risks with the characters. The metaphor I always use is that, when I wrote for the *Next Generation* television episodes, it was like living with your family. Now, it's like visiting your family at Christmas every couple of years."

With any luck, *First Contact* will mark the first of many such family gatherings. □

Zefram Cochrane (James Cromwell), inventor of the warp drive, oversees La Forge (LeVar Burton), Riker (Jonathan Frakes) and Dr. Beverly Crusher (Gates McFadden).





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SCIENCE

Continued from page 38

find vent life. Two options: It looks like ours or it doesn't. Either one has enormous inuplications. We've got to be sure we don't contaminate it. We then study other vents. It's a whole planet, with the same surface area as the Earth, since it has no oceans.

BAXTER: It's got to change our view of the role of the solar system in our future. It's not just a bunch of rocks and geology for us to go and pave over and use as a resource. Even at the most basic, it's much more expensive to send a manned mission to Mars or the moon which will not contaminate, as opposed to a big quick dirty one, which *will* contaminate. So to do it in a clean way is much more difficult than to do it in a dirty way. But you're right, we have to. And suddenly the idea of terraforming, especially terraforming quickly, seems ethically very dubious: to pave the place over before you're sure what was down there.

BENFORD: Terraforming is out.

BAXTER: I must say, my reaction on reading *Red Mars* was I came down on the "rocks have rights" side of the argument. I thought it was wrong to trash the place even if it's dead. But now that there's this possibility of this wonderful stuff down there, and whether they're surviving or not, maybe capable of being revived in the future, I really think it's wrong. The universe is not just a playground or a resource for us. The moon is more than a strip mine. We should cherish these places because once they're gone they'll be gone forever. And who wants it all to look like California? With all due respect to California.

BENFORD: NASA is considering fast options to get there in half the projected time. Launch a sample return mission in 2000. A plan for a manned landing around 2005. I want to see the end of chemical rockets for scientific exploration, which are like exploring the new world in a birch bark canoe – underpowered, slow, and prone to failure. The Mars Observer blew a valve and tore itself to pieces. We need to develop nuclear propulsion rockets for deep missions beyond the Van Allen belts. Until the nations of Earth can agree to abrogate existing treaties on use of nukes in space, and collaborate on the development of a standard vehicle, we will not get anywhere very seriously. I would not volunteer for a manned expedition to Mars on chemical rockets that have to keep liquid oxygen and hydrogen in tanks for three years in deep space. No one has done that for more than a week in space. It's fundamentally crazy. Here's a joke going around NASA right now. We decide we're going to Mars manned, but no return. Just search for life and die there. They interview an engineer. "How much to make this mission?" He says, "A million dollars for my family." They interview a doctor of medicine. He says, "A million dollar bequest in my name for a chair at my university, and two million for my family." They



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interview a lawyer, who says, "Nine million." "Why?" "Hey," he says, "I'll kick back four million to you, I keep four million, and we send the engineer." If this becomes politics as usual, I agree, we won't get there very quickly. If we instead run it as we did in the '50s, we'll be there faster. And we'll have to lose the engineer. People are going to die on this mission. NASA's crucial mistake was to send school teachers into space, instead of saying, these launches may end in death. That makes it much more interesting to watch a launch.

SF AGE: But if we knew going into launches they would end up like Everest expeditions, where one of ten or whatever die, would we do them?

BAXTER: Or the Antarctic explorations, where there was a high but not very well–publicized death rate among the scientists who were sent down there. That's the model, really. They used to ask the astronauts during the interview process, "What risk would you accept to go to Mars? Would you accept a fifty–fifty chance of being killed? Would you accept one in ten? Would you accept one in a hundred?" And they had a rule of thumb. They looked for one in ten as the answer, which showed that you were realistic about the risks, you were prepared to take a chance, but you're not foolhardy.

BENFORD: One in ten, I think, is technically achievable. But not one in a thousand, which we sold to the American public with the shuttle when it was really four in a hundred.

SF AGE: So what is the actual time table? We're going to slice the other meteors and search for additional evidence. Assuming the response is positive, is that enough to energize us to the next level?

BENFORD: Suppose the results are positive, if Bill Schopf's objections are overcome with a whole population of different forms and sizes, so it looks like there's a community. Properly handled, with real leadership, we could send a return sample a few years into the next millennium, a manned mission before 2010.

BENFORD: The NASA budget is less than the annual *increase* in the entitlements budget. So we're not talking about breaking the bank here. The NASA approach of Disneyfying space must end. Space must be seen as dangerous, as mysterious, as immensely exiting. As both immense and exciting. The human prospect has to be the point of the program, not school teachers in space. We can't explore Titan with chemical rockets. It's fatal. And it's slow. And it looks stupid. Like sailing to Antarctica in a skiff.

BENFORD: We can do that in the space station we start building next year. We can go international and develop the nuclear rocket. That takes it out of the hands of the American media, puts it world media starved for material. I think you underestimate the world's sense of wonder. We've taught them by 20th century history that the United States uniquely puts together viable coalitions to deal with big problems. World War II, the

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Cold War, the Gulf War. Let's give them that scenario again. Everybody gets to join. It's not just an American program. Let's have some ideas from other places. Let's have a Polish mission to the poles of Mars! First, don't use the shuttle. Shoot the shuttle in the back of the head, bury the body, no gravestone. Develop several methods of getting into orbit that have higher reliability.

BAXTER: I know. When you look at the shuttle, it's the same technology that Goddard was developing. It's a V-2 with air conditioning. We've overdue for a breakthrough, aren't we, in this stuff? Von Braun was fifty years ahead of his time. Well, now we've caught up with him. We need a quick way. I've always regretted that we don't live on the moon, that to launch five guys into orbit you need 10,000 technicians and tons of fuel, but on the moon you've got your little engine the size of a Volkswagen car engine, and Neil puts his sandwiches away and turns to Buzz and says, "Are you strapped in yet?" and they push the button and go. If only it was as easy as that. Any maybe one day, it will be.

SF AGE: How long will it take to get to Mars manned if we do it right, but also, how long do you think it will really take there the way we bumble along as a race? What we should do versus what you think will really end up happening?

BENFORD: A, ten years. B, twenty years. C, the pessimist's answer: Never. Gee, we have bills to pay. Baby needs a new pair of shoes.

BAXTER: I think my answers would be slightly different. If we did it right in the kind of planned way that we've talked about, the way Apollo should have been done, then twenty years, let's say. If we do it wrong, the answer may be, never at all, or it may be ten years, but wrong, with throwaway stuff. Another kind of technological dead end. Of those three options I would vote for the nice planned version. But given the choice of never or ten years, I would vote for the ten years every time. I would much rather have Apollo happen than not happen. And if you can do it, you've got a whole new generation to be inspired. There are thing to find on Mars that weren't there on the moon. So go for it.

BENFORD: I'm an optimist. What's the percentage in being a pessimist anyway?

BAXTER: I'm an optimist mainly based on Goldin and the creative guys he's got and the careful way he's managing NASA. They've got some good plans, very strong plans.

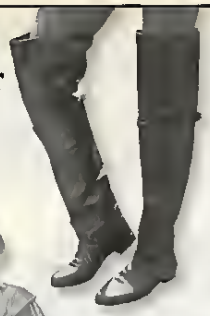
SF AGE: Any final thoughts?

BAXTER: Regarding the life on Mars, if it works out, if it turns out to be true, it's totally transformed our view of our place in the universe. For good or ill, we are just not the same. We have responsibilities and opportunities that were not apparent when we thought we were alone. It's quite wonderful. It's transformed our view of the future of the human species.

BENFORD: Properly handled, this could be the biggest opening of human horizons for the general public since the driver of Sputnik. Let's do it. □

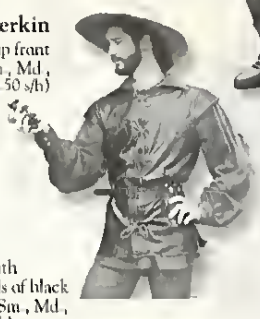
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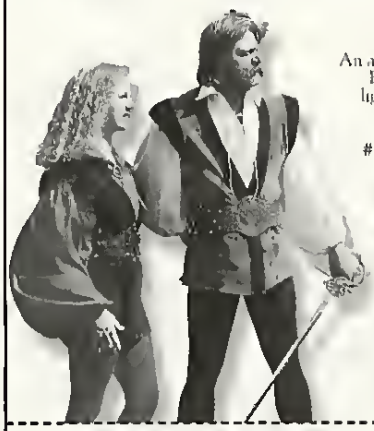
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Ben Bova is the author of over seventy-five SF and non-fiction books, and has been chronicling the adventures of Sam Gunn for a number of years. (Fans of the duo will want to track down Gunn's last appearance in our pages in the May 19956 issue.) He is the president emeritus of both the National Space Institute and the Science Fiction Writers of America, and former president of the National Space Institute. He was formerly editor for both *Analog* and *Omni*, and has won the Hugo Award for Best Editor six times — one during each year in which he was eligible.

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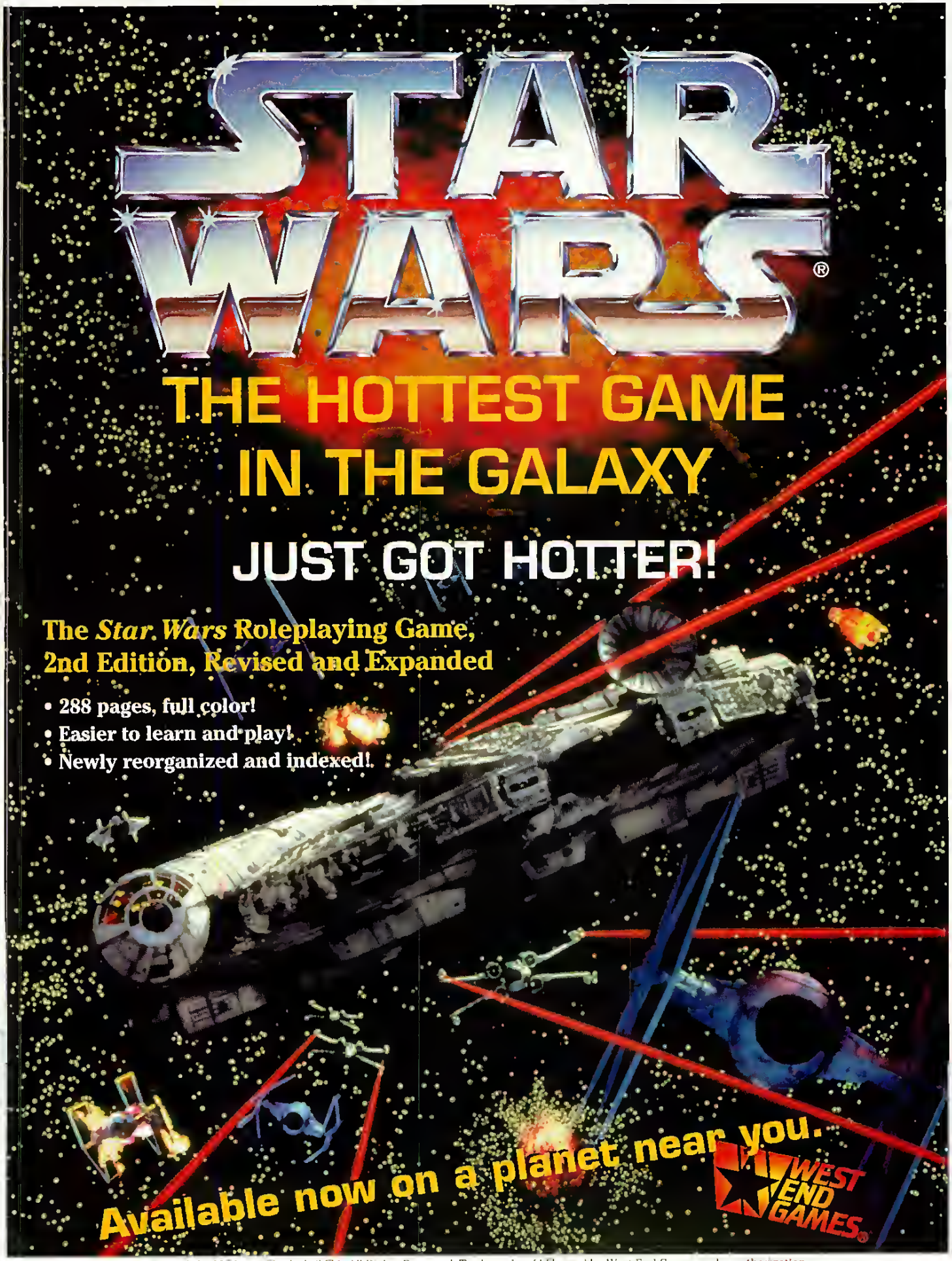
Alan Dean Foster has produced novelizations of such well-known films as *Star Wars*, all three *Alien* films, and *Alien Nation*. He created the treatment for the first *Star Trek* movie. His novel *Cyber Way* won the Southwest Book Award for fiction in 1990, the first science fiction work ever to do so. He has taught screen writing, literature and film history at UCLA and Los Angeles City College. He recently signed a long-term agreement to create stories for MagicMaker, Inc., a new Interactive Media Company. □



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